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**The Italian Literature of the Axis War
(1944–1974)
and the Collective Memories of World War II**

**by
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Declaration of Authorship

I Guido Bartolini hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

This thesis analyses a selection of texts that are part of the Italian literature of the Axis War, written between 1945 and 1975, examining the relationship between literary representations and the Italian collective memory discourse of World War Two. This study builds on a number of theoretical frameworks, combining memory studies, historiography, thematic criticism, and narratology, which are used in order to explore the relations between literature and memory narratives about the past.

As a result of this interdisciplinary approach, the analysis centres on those figures of repetition (topoi, themes, masterplots) that characterise, at different levels of complexity, the texts of the corpus and that have been taken as points of connection between literary representations and collective memory narratives. Through the study of the most recurrent tropes across the corpus, this thesis pinpoints the existence of dominant structures that affected the literary representation of the Axis War, which have strong links to the ways in which the Second World War and the Fascist past have been narrativised in postwar Italy.

The literature of the Axis War represents the Italians as innocent victims, it abstains from portraying them as perpetrators of violence, and develops textual strategies that avoid conveying to their readers any sense of guilt, with only a minority of texts resisting this overbearing representation. These aspects are analysed through a series of close readings, which, whilst forming the backbone of the thesis, intersect with the examination of several theoretical issues, such as collective memory, the literary concepts of themes, motifs, and masterplots, the idea of silence in war writings, and questions of individual and collective guilt.

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Introduction

'The only chance we might have of climbing a moral rung would be to recognise the evil in ourselves and to struggle against it'.¹

Any study on collective memory deals with something elusive. No matter how well refined and developed the terminology and conceptualisations deployed — and today's scholarship has reached a high level of sophistication — scholars will always be left with a sense of indeterminacy and approximation generated by the impalpability of this object of enquiry.

Memories belong to the personal, intimate, interior lives of individual beings and they remain largely mysterious and unmasterable even to the person who remembers them. If people are not fully able to understand, describe, and explain their own memories, there are good reasons to doubt that a third person could study and write about how large groups of people remember the past.

Yet groups do negotiate their views on the past collectively, and the ways in which this is done has important implications, since it affects how people interpret their present reality. The construction and negotiation of a collectively held understanding of the past by a given social group is a complex phenomenon in which group members participate with various degrees of knowledge and awareness.

¹ T. Todorov, *Hope and Memory: Reflections on the Twentieth Century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005), p. 144.

It is above all in comparative perspectives that this intricate process becomes visible: scholars can observe similarities and differences in the ways people know and retell the past and use them to point to the existence either of shared narratives or divergent strategies through which the past is remembered. The identification of these analogies and dissimilarities always necessitates a certain degree of conjecture, abstraction, and generalisation, which can be reduced with the help of a series of theoretical tools; however, these issues cannot be fully resolved and should not be denied.

In relation to the Italian memory of World War II, considerable work has already been done. Following the pioneering studies made in the 1990s by oral historians such as Luisa Passerini, Leonardo Paggi, Giovanni Contini, Alessandro Portelli, and Paolo Pezzino, since the 2000s the Italian memories of World War II have been explored by several historians.² A particularly prominent scholar in this field is Filippo Focardi, who has published extensively on this matter.³ His works, together with those of other scholars of Italian memory, will constitute the basis of this thesis's understanding of the formation and evolution of the Italian collective memory of World War II.

² See, for instance, L. Paggi, A. Bravo, eds., *Storia e memoria di un massacro ordinario* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1996); G. Contini, *La memoria divisa* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1997); P. Pezzino, *Anatomia di un massacro: controversia sopra una strage tedesca* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997); A. Portelli, *L'ordine è già stato eseguito: Roma, le Fosse Ardeatine, la memoria* (Rome: Donzelli, 1999).

³ F. Focardi, *La guerra della memoria: la Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi* (Rome: Laterza, 2005); Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano: la rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale* (Rome; Bari: Laterza, 2013); Focardi, B. Groppo, eds., *L'Europa e le sue memorie: politiche e culture del ricordo dopo il 1989* (Rome: Viella, 2013).

In the present work, indeed, memory plays an important, but auxiliary role. The main focus of this research is the literary representation, across three decades of Italian narrative, of the wars that the Italians fought under the Fascist dictatorship, as members of the Axis Power. The Axis War, with its military campaigns and especially with its occupations, has undoubtedly been one of the most neglected and overlooked aspects of the history of World War II in Italian culture. This thesis investigates the ways in which this war has been represented by narrative texts, in order to assess the contribution that literature had in transmitting a memory of this event to Italian readers.

This research, thus, does not aim to elaborate a new take on the Italian collective memory of World War II; by contrast, it will follow the periodisation and the conceptualisations developed by historians of the Italian memory of World War II, in order to pursue a twofold goal. Firstly, this study aims to show the contribution that Axis War literature had in negotiating the collective memories of World War II — and of the Axis War in particular — in postwar Italy. Simultaneously, this research illustrates how collective memories of World War II affected the ways in which literary texts portrayed the Axis War.

In other words, this thesis intends to show how literature can constitute a privileged ground for discussing matters of collective memory and understanding the dynamics of its diffusion across society; moreover, it aims to document how a nuanced understanding of the formation and dissemination of collective memories can help illuminate the representations offered by literary texts.

Among the innumerable and little-studied narrative books that form what can be called the literature of the Axis War, this thesis selects twenty-three heterogeneous texts, published between 1944 and 1974. Besides the temporal framework, whose rationale will be discussed below, the definition of this corpus of primary texts has been based on thematic principles and on issues of literary genre.

The delimitation of the main corpus had a twofold aim: avoiding an excessively wide body of texts that could be studied only through a superficial catalogue of the different depictions developed by the various authors and, on the contrary, avoiding limiting the discussion to a few representative narratives. The choice has been made, then, to study only certain segments of the Axis War, and to investigate the literature produced on these segments through a corpus that should be as complete as possible. In this way this thesis tries to find a balance between exhaustiveness of the corpus and deep analysis of the texts belonging to it.

The first thematic principle governing the selection of the texts is to focus on narratives that deal with the military campaigns of the Axis War and with the occupation of foreign territories – the latter being the most overlooked aspect of this already largely neglected war. This choice results in the exclusion of those narratives that recount the experiences of the Italian prisoners of war (POWs), which usually focus only on the time

spent in the prison camps and pass over any representation of the period before the capture.⁴

Moreover, the decision to focus on the Italian occupations led to the exclusion of texts dealing with the African segments of the Axis War. The campaigns in North Africa, indeed, were fought in largely unpopulated areas and did not present the superimposition between soldiers and civilians that characterised the other theatres of war where the Italians operated.⁵ Besides, this segment of the Axis War, together with that fought in Italian East Africa, is inescapably entangled with the history of Italian colonialism and its study would require consideration of colonial literature and postcolonial theory, which fall outside the remit of the present enquiry.⁶

In terms of literary genre, this thesis started from the initial premise of addressing all the fictional accounts on the Axis War published in the selected period. The choice to deal with works of fiction implies the exclusion of the memoirs written by ex-servicemen. These numerous books, often issued by minor publishing houses, had generally little circulation, generating a limited reception; therefore they did not appear particularly significant for the present study that intends to establish what kind of representation of the war has been conveyed to Italian

⁴ For a partial list of the texts written on the experiences of the Italian prisoners of war see G. Rochat, 'Memorialistica e storiografia sull'internamento', in N. Della Santa, ed., *I militari italiani internati dai tedeschi dopo l'8 settembre 1943* (Florence: Giunti, 1986).

⁵ G. Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir: riti funebri e culto nazionale alle origini della Repubblica* (Turin: Utet, 2010), pp. 186-187. On the texts dealing with the African campaigns of the Axis War see L. Ceva, *Africa Settentrionale: negli studi e nella letteratura* (Rome: Bonacci, 1982).

⁶ For a discussion of some texts on the African campaigns of the Axis War in relation to colonialism see G. Tomasello, *L'Africa tra mito e realtà: storia della letteratura coloniale italiana* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2004), pp. 199-208.

readers more broadly. Moreover, written with the aim of reporting the personal experiences of their authors, these texts appeared potentially less capable of narrating the collective experience of Italy's involvement in World War II as a Fascist country on the side of Nazi Germany, than their fictional counterparts.

Yet the decision to privilege fictional accounts has to be further discussed and problematised. The narratives that this thesis deals with recount, within a fictional storyworld, historical events that were often endured by the authors. Hence, despite being works of fiction, these texts maintain a strong referential point in the historical circumstances of World War II and present numerous affinities with autobiographical writings.

As a result, in order to define some coordinates that can guide the process of selection of the fictional texts that are part of the corpus of this work it seems necessary, first of all, to explore the blurred and rarely unambiguous borders that separate fictional narratives from non-fictional ones.

This study follows the conceptualisations developed by Philippe Gasparini who, building on the works of Philippe Lejeune, has distinguished between various forms of autobiographical writing, both fictional and non-fictional.⁷ In his pioneering theoretical study on autobiographies, Lejeune defines this genre on the basis of two features: firstly, a triple homonymy among author, narrator, and protagonist;

⁷ P. Gasparini, *Autofiction: une aventure du langage* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008).

secondly, the presence of a 'pact' between author and reader — stipulated through elements of the paratext, editorial information, and preliminary remarks — which commits the former to recount events that happened and the latter to believe that what is written actually took place.⁸

Gasparini sustains the notion of the pact as one of the fundamental criteria by which factual autobiographies, as a literary genre, can be distinguished from other types of narratives.⁹ He wisely observes, though, that the idea of the pact does not oblige every author of autobiographies to tell only what they actually remember, without any interpolation of fictitious material, just as it does not prevent some readers from doubting the veracity of what is narrated.¹⁰ Texts that establish and do not openly break an autobiographical pact simply facilitate their own reception as autobiographies by reducing as much as possible their connections with fiction.

This conceptualisation implies a pragmatic understanding of the borders between fiction and non-fiction. The distinction between the two is, indeed, construed as a matter of reception: a text that presents the triple homonymy among author, narrator, and main character and that establishes an autobiographical pact without breaking it encourages readers to read it as a factual autobiography; by contrast, a text that does not present these features generates more easily a reception as a work of fiction.

⁸ P. Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975; repr. 1996), pp. 13-35.

⁹ Gasparini, *Autofiction*, pp. 243-244, 287-300.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

While certain narratives can be straightforwardly assigned to one of these two realms, there are also texts that fall into an area of indeterminacy, which makes distinctions less neat and more open to interpretation. These more ambiguous texts present some of the features that characterise an autobiography, but without inducing an autobiographical reception. In these cases this thesis follows Gasparini, who assigns the narratives presenting these ambivalences to various forms of fiction.

This study, thus, focuses on texts that are part of the literature of the Axis War and that encourage a reception as works of fiction. The corpus is formed by five types of fictional narratives, which present an increasing degree of affinities with the genre of autobiography. First of all the corpus includes novels set during World War II, such as Ugo Pirro's *Jovanka e le altre* (1959), Marcello Venturi's *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia* (1963), Luigi Preti's *Giovinezza, Giovinezza* (1964), and Elsa Morante's *La Storia* (1974). These texts, written several years after the end of World War II, combine fictional characters and events with historical ones, after varying levels of historical enquiries carried out by their authors. Importantly, they are recounted by a narrative voice that cannot be conflated with the person of the author and, therefore, they firmly belong to the realm of fiction.

A second group of texts is formed by Gian Carlo Fusco's eccentric works of prose, i.e. *Le Rose del ventennio* (1958) and *Guerra d'Albania* (1961). These border-crossing narratives constitute a mixed genre, blending military chronicles, historical writing, newspaper trend pieces,

and fictionalised storytelling. While dealing with historical events and mimicking in many ways the language and style of historiography, these texts, which do not establish any autobiographical pact, present a series of narrative traits that invite readers to a fictional reading, such as dialogues between invented characters.¹¹

A third set of narratives, establishing closer relations with autobiography, corresponds to what Gasparini classifies as 'autobiographical novel'. Texts belonging to this genre are based on a 'strategy of ambiguity': they recount a series of events that are somehow grounded in the authors' real experiences and in their memory, but they are heavily transfigured by fictionalisation processes, engendering the same reception of a work of fiction.¹²

This group includes Persio Nesti's *I villaggi bruciano* (1947), Renzo Biasion's collection of short stories *Sagapò* (1953), Renzo Renzi's film proposal 'L'armata s'agapò' (1953), Manlio Cecovini's *Ritorno da Poggio Boschetto* (1954), Giovanni Pirelli's *L'entusiasta* (1958), Giulio Bedeschi's *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio* (1963), and Manlio Cancogni's *La linea del Tomori* (1965). All these narratives are set in the same places where the authors served during the Axis War; however, the main protagonists are always fictional characters who, at the most, can suggest some sort of connections with their authors, but cannot be directly associated to them.

¹¹ On how the modality in which a story is narrated can affect its reception as a work of fiction or as a work of non-fiction see G. Genette, *Fiction and Diction* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 65-68.

¹² Gasparini, *Autofiction*, p. 300; see also Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 25.

To this group of autobiographical novels three other texts can be added, which play even more with the ambiguity of their status, suspended between fiction and autobiography. Raul Lunardi's *Diario di un soldato semplice* (1952), Ugo Pirro's *Le soldatesse* (1956), and Luigi Silori's short story *Le «case» di guerra: La «casa chiusa» di Atene* (1965) are all set in the same areas where the authors operated as part of the Italian army and, more notably, are recounted by an anonymous first person narrator who is also the protagonist of the story. This anonymity strengthens the possible identification between narrator and author, as in the case of an autobiography, despite the fact that the books were published in editorial series of fiction and do not openly establish an autobiographical pact.

The last two groups, formed by just one text each, blur the distinction between fiction and autobiography even further. Curzio Malaparte's *Kaputt* (1944) is a complex narrative that consciously plays with the uncertain borders separating literary genres. The text, indeed, presents all the features that are necessary to classify a book as an autobiography: the narrator and main protagonist of the story is Malaparte himself; the book follows his wandering around Europe, respecting quite precisely the actual biography of the author; moreover, the opening chapter of the text, which reconstructs the history of *Kaputt*'s original manuscript, establishes an autobiographical pact with the readers. Despite these features, though, the elaborate language in which it is written, the aesthetic power with which many scenes are constructed and, above all, the highly imaginative and unreal events that it narrates

locate *Kaputt* in the realm of fiction, within the genre that Gasparini calls 'autofabulation'.¹³

The last group is constituted by Mario Terrosi's *La casa di Novach* (1956) a text that offers an extreme example of the liminality and contiguity that can run between autobiographical novel and autobiography. The book does not establish an autobiographical pact and it was published within a book series of fictional narratives. Nevertheless, the text leaves open the possibility of an autobiographical reception: the story, indeed, is recounted by a first person narrator who initially appears as unnamed, but will be revealed later as having the same name as the author, Mario Terrosi. This text, written in a realistic style, without the imaginative creations that facilitate the location of Malaparte's work in the realm of fiction, belongs to that literary space of indeterminacy concerned with the fictionalisation of autobiographical experiences, which Gasparini names 'autonarration'.¹⁴

Besides these eighteen narratives that can easily, or problematically, be received as fictional, the corpus includes also four texts that belong, instead, to the genre of the autobiography: Eugenio Corti's *I più non ritornano* (1947), Nuto Revelli's *La guerra dei poveri* (1962), and Mario Rigoni Stern's *Il sergente nella neve* (1953) and *Quota Albania* (1971). These narratives present the triple homonymy among protagonist, narrator, and author and, more importantly, establish and do

¹³ Gasparini, *Autofiction*, pp. 297-298.

¹⁴ In Gasparini's analysis, though, this term is actually used for postmodern narratives that, through fragmented narration, formally innovative language, and largely metadiscursive practices, complicate the relationship between the experience of the world and its narrativisation. See *Ibid.*, pp. 311-313.

not break an autobiographical pact by presenting themselves as memoirs written on the real experiences of their authors in the Axis War.

The reason why these texts have been taken into account relates to the same motivation for which, in general, it has been decided to exclude other memoirs: since this thesis aims to explore the contribution of literature in the dissemination of representations of the past across Italian society, it seems particularly important to study texts that had a wide circulation, rather than those that had a limited one. Corti, Revelli, and Rigoni are among the best-known writers related to the Axis War and their names have become inextricably entangled with its cultural depiction.¹⁵ Hence in the light of the importance that these authors had in the narrative mediation of the Axis War within Italian culture, it appears necessary to address the part of their production published in the time frame addressed by this study.

Finally, the corpus also includes another book by Rigoni Stern, *Ritorno sul Don* (1973). This text is composed of a series of short stories that belong to different genres: some of them have Rigoni as the main

¹⁵ Not only were their memoirs particularly successful, attracting for their quality the attentions of literary scholars, but, after their first works, these men became prolific writers and published other autobiographical accounts, fictional narratives, and collections of memories and letters. Mario Rigoni Stern is one of the most prolific Italian author of war narratives on both World War II and World War I: see for instance M. Rigoni Stern, *I racconti di guerra* (Turin: Einaudi, 2006); Eugenio Corti is the author of the longest Italian novel on World War II: Corti, *Il Cavallo Rosso* (Milan: Ares, 1983); Revelli has published numerous works of non-fiction collecting memories and letters of other soldiers who served in the Axis War: N. Revelli, *La strada del Davai* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966); Revelli *L'ultimo fronte: lettere di soldati caduti o dispersi nella seconda guerra mondiale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1971). Bedeschi, too, edited several collections of memories of Axis War soldiers: G. Bedeschi, *Nikolajewka: c'ero anch'io* (Milan: Mursia, 1972); Bedeschi, *Fronte greco-albanese: c'ero anch'io* (Milan: Mursia, 1977); Bedeschi, *Fronte d'Africa: c'ero anch'io* (Milan: Mursia, 1979); Bedeschi, *Fronte russo: c'ero anch'io*, 2 vols (Milan: Mursia, 1982); Bedeschi, *Fronte jugoslavo-balcanico: c'ero anch'io* (Milan: Mursia, 1985); Bedeschi, *Fronte italiano: c'ero anch'io: La popolazione in guerra* (Milan: Mursia, 1987); Bedeschi, *Prigione: c'ero anch'io* (Milan: Mursia, 1990).

character and are presented as factual autobiographical writings; others have imaginary characters as protagonists and can be read as fictional short-stories; others are narrated by an anonymous voice and remain indeterminate, being suspended between fiction and non-fiction.

The corpus that this thesis analyses is formed, thus, by twenty-three texts, and it brings together all the authors who, as far as I know, have published fictional works on the European campaigns and occupations of the Axis War for major publishers in the selected timeframe.¹⁶ During this period some of these authors, such as Malaparte, Cancogni, Pirro, Bedeschi, and Fusco published other works that address the Axis War.¹⁷ However, since the representations offered by these narratives do not present significant differences from those developed in their previous works — for what concerns at least the aims of this research — the decision has been taken to limit the corpus to the aforementioned texts.

A meaningful result of the process of selection of the texts is that, with the exception of Morante's *La Storia*, which, albeit, addresses the Axis War only incidentally, all the texts that are going to be discussed were written by authors who served in the Italian army during World War II. This fact shows once more the fragile borders that separate

¹⁶ Once this research was basically complete I realised that another text could have been added to the corpus, i.e. Indro Montanelli's *Qui non riposano*. Published in 1945, this autobiographical novel tells the story of the life of three fictional characters who experienced many of the events the author went through: firstly in the 1935 Italo-Ethiopian war and then on several war fronts of the Axis War as war correspondent for *Il Corriere della Sera*: I. Montanelli, *Qui non riposano: romanzo* (Milan: Tarantola, 1945).

¹⁷ C. Malaparte, *La pelle: storia e racconto* (Rome; Milan: Aria d'Italia, 1949); U. Pirro, *Mille tradimenti: romanzo* (Milan: Bompiani, 1959); G. C. Fusco, *La lunga marcia* (Milan: Longanesi, 1961); M. Cancogni, *Il ritorno* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1971); Bedeschi, *Il peso dello zaino* (Milan: Garzanti, 1971); Bedeschi, *La rivolta di Abele* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1972).

fictional accounts from autobiographical writing and brings attention to the importance that memory had in the narrativisation of the Axis War in Italian culture.

Furthermore, the fact that only writers who had had a direct experience of this war decided to write about it shows the sparse attention that the Axis War received in Italian literature. In order to better address and discuss this point, this thesis will also briefly explore the representations of this war put forward by some prominent Italian novels of World War II.

This secondary corpus of primary texts is composed by Italo Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947), Cesare Pavese's *La casa in collina* (1949) and *La luna e i falò* (1950), Alberto Moravia's *La ciociara* (1957), Giovanni Arpino's *L'ombra delle colline* (1964), and also by Elsa Morante's *La Storia*, which will therefore be part of both corpora. Given the partial nature of this small corpus, a similar study is far from being exhaustive; however it will be useful to illustrate, through symptomatic exemplifications, the marginalisation of the Axis War within Italian literature.

In relation to the span of time that this thesis addresses, the upper and lower dates of the considered period are marked by the publications of two novels, Malaparte's *Kaputt* and Morante's *La Storia*. The former represents one of the earliest European novels devoted to World War II; the latter constitutes the first example of an Italian writer who addresses the Axis War without having taken part into it. Morante's novel can therefore be seen as a benchmark in the development of the Italian

memory of the Axis War, since it marks the passage from a narrativisation that somehow maintains contacts with the personal memories of the authors to one that does not and relies entirely on the images of that war that circulated across Italian culture.

The choice to investigate a period running through three decades of Italian narrative is also due to what has been seen as a necessity: going beyond 1968. Numerous studies on the European memories of World War II have shown that, across Europe, this date has often represented a turning point. In countries such as Germany and France, for instance, post-1968 culture is seen as a moment of renovation in the collective views of World War II, which led to questioning the responsibilities of the previous generation and to a re-assessment of the countries' culpability for the past, in relation to Nazism and the Vichy regime.¹⁸

Despite the importance that 1968 also had in the evolution of the Italian memory of World War II, in Italy this phase neither saw the beginning of a re-evaluation of the national responsibility for Fascism, nor for the Axis War.¹⁹ Hence, it appears necessary to embrace a span of time

¹⁸ See H. Peitsch, 'Introduction', in Peitsch, C. Burdett, C. Gorrara, eds., *European Memories of the Second World War: New Perspectives on Postwar Literature* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 1999), p. xxviii. On the specific role of 1968 in the memory culture of France and West Germany see R. J. Golsan, 'The Legacy of World War II in France: Mapping the Discourse of Memory', in R. N. Lebow, W. Kansteiner, C. Fogu, eds., *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (Durham N.C; London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 74; W. Kansteiner, 'Losing the War, Winning the Memory Battle: The Legacy of Nazism, World War II, and the Holocaust in the Federal Republic of Germany', in *ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁹ On the different role that 1968 played in Italy in relation to the memory of World War II see G. Corni, *Raccontare la guerra: la memoria organizzata* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2012), p. 3; Fogu, 'Italiani brava gente: The Legacy of Fascist Historical Culture on Italian Politics of Memory', in *The Politics of Memory*, p. 155. On the changes that, nevertheless, 1968 produced, in particular on the memory of the Italian Resistance, see Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*, pp. 47-50.

that exceeds this important date, in order to show the consistency in the representation of the Axis War in Italian culture beyond it.

Throughout the decades that this thesis considers, there were few variations in the ways the Axis War was represented in Italian literature. This study, therefore, will not outline a succession of different temporal phases corresponding to diverse ways of portraying this event. By contrast, it will approach the texts of the main corpus in a synchronic perspective, in order to show the presence of a series of recurrent features that have shaped the depiction of the Axis War in Italian culture for several decades.

In a similar study, while the *terminus post quem* can be easily identified, being the aftermath of the 8th of September 1943, when Italy lost the Axis War and a memory of this event started to be negotiated, the *terminus ante quem* appears much more unclear and ambivalent. Although in relation to literary analysis this thesis addresses representations of the Axis War until 1974, the considerations that will be made have implications that extend beyond the time frame considered. In fact, the memory narratives on the Axis War that were formed in the postwar years, which this thesis will highlight through the study of literary texts, has lasted largely unchallenged throughout the twentieth century.

In the new millennium, the Axis War, which has always remained at the margins of the public discourse on World War II, does not seem to have enjoyed particular consideration within national liturgies, politics, cinema, or literature. By contrast, it has become an increasingly central

subject of historical enquiry. Anticipated by Angelo Del Boca's studies on the legacy of Italian colonialism, by the works on World War II by Enzo Collotti, and by military historians such as Giorgio Rochat and Lucio Ceva, a new generation of historians has recently focused with renewed interest on the wars that Italy fought as a Fascist nation.²⁰

Historians such as Davide Rodogno, Costantino Di Sante, Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, Lidia Santarelli, Eric Gobetti, and Davide Conti have devoted important works to the Italian occupations during World War II, the repression of civilians, and the creations of concentration camps for POWs and opponents.²¹ Particular attention has also been given to the Italian war crimes committed during the Axis War and to how these wrongdoings were removed from the Italian public discourse of the postwar years.²²

²⁰ A. Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa orientale*, 4 vols (Rome; Bari: Laterza, 1976-1984); Del Boca, *L'Africa nella coscienza degli italiani: miti, memorie, errori, sconfitte* (Rome: Laterza, 1992). On Italian colonialism see also Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano* (Turin: Loescher, 1973); N. Labanca, *Oltremare: storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002). As example of early studies on the Axis War see E. Collotti, T. Sala, eds., *Le potenze dell'Asse e la Jugoslavia. Saggi e documenti 1941/1943* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974); Rochat, G. Massobrio, *Breve storia dell'esercito italiano dal 1861 al 1943* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978).

²¹ Rodogno, *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo*; C. Di Sante, ed., *Italiani senza onore: i crimini in Jugoslavia e i processi negati 1941-1951* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2004); C. S. Capogreco, *I campi del duce: l'internamento civile nell'Italia fascista 1940-1943* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004); E. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra: gli italiani in Jugoslavia 1941-1943* (Rome: Carocci, 2007); D. Conti, *L'occupazione Italiana dei Balcani: crimini di guerra e mito della 'brava gente' 1940-1943* (Rome: Odradek, 2008). Also non-Italian historians have worked on this topic: see for instance T. Ferenc, *Si ammazza troppo poco: condannati a morte, ostaggi, passati per le armi nella provincia di Lubiana 1941-1943* (Ljubljana: Istituto per la storia moderna, 1999); J. H. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic: Mussolini's Conquest of Yugoslavia 1941-1943* (New York: Enigma, 2005); T. Schlemmer, *Invasori, non vittime: la campagna italiana di Russia 1941-1943* (Rome; Bari: Laterza, 2009). See also the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 9.3 (2004), a special issue dedicated to the 'hidden pages' of Italian history of World War II, with contributions by Marta Petrusiewicz, Claudio Pavone, Lidia Santarelli, Nicola Labanca, James Burgwyn, Filippo Focardi, Lutz Klinkhammer, and Michele Battini.

²² M. Franzinelli, *Le stragi nascoste: l'armadio della vergogna: impunità e rimozione dei crimini di guerra nazifascisti 1943-2001* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002); M. Battini, *Peccati di memoria: la mancata Norimberga italiana* (Rome: Laterza, 2003); L. Baldissara, Pezzino,

The high number of publications shows the renewed interest that in the last fifteen years the Axis War has received in the field of historical enquiries, a fact that testifies to the will of Italian historians to deal with the darkest pages of the national history of World War II, which have long been overlooked.

The present thesis positions itself within this historical trend. Numerous historians have highlighted the misdeeds that the Italians committed in the theatres of war where they operated and many scholars, such as, for instance, Focardi, Santarelli, and Ruth Ben-Ghiat have explained the process of oblivion of responsibility that affected postwar Italy. Few, however, have shown how cultural production was highly entangled in this process and no one has investigated in detail the multiple conceptualisations that literature passed down to the Italian readers.²³

By focusing on the exceptionally understudied representations of the Axis War in Italian narrative, this thesis explores the views about the past that literary texts disseminated, in order to show how the construction of certain perspectives on the past was not only the result of the action of political actors and other public figures, but also the result of

eds., *Crimini e memorie di guerra: violenze contro le popolazioni e politiche del ricordo* (Naples: L'Ancora del Mediterraneo, 2004); L. Borgomaneri, *Crimini di guerra: il mito del bravo italiano tra repressione del ribellismo e guerra ai civili nei territori occupati* (Milan: Angelo Guerini, 2006); Focardi, *Criminali di guerra in libertà: un accordo segreto tra Italia e Germania federale 1949-55* (Rome: Carocci, 2008). See also the following works of popular history: Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?: un mito duro a morire* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005); G. Oliva, *Si ammazza troppo poco* (Milan: Mondadori, 2007).

²³ As example of studies exploring the relationship that postwar Italy established with the past that give particular attention to cultural processes, see Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir*, especially pp. 220-272; R. Forlenza, 'Sacrificial Memory and Political Legitimacy in Postwar Italy: Reliving and Remembering World War II', *History and Memory*, 24.2 (2012), 73-116.

diffused cultural processes, such as the publication and circulation of works of fiction.

This thesis will explore the ways the Axis War entered into the literary space: it will investigate which events were put in the spotlight, which ones were overlooked, and what meanings the literary texts conferred on the war experience. Seminal issues that will be addressed concern the representation of violence, both received and inflicted, and how the narratives addressed the idea of guilt and responsibility for both the war and Fascism, in order to establish how the selected texts helped the Italians form an ethical awareness of the crimes committed in the past by their national community. In other words, this thesis intends to explore the contribution of literary depiction to the formation of the Italian collective memory of World War II.

This study takes the following structure. Chapter One undertakes a theoretical exploration within the interdisciplinary field of Memory Studies in order to clarify the conceptualisation of collective memory that this thesis embraces and develop a theoretically supported terminology for its study. This theoretical discussion will end with an elucidation of the role that cultural production, and literary mediation in particular, plays in the dynamics of collective memory.

A key conclusion of this theoretical investigation will be that processes of repetition constitute one of the fundamental principles governing the relationships between collective memory and literary production. This idea will be paramount for the study of the literary materials. With the help of thematic criticism and formalist narratology,

which will offer the theoretical basis for the study of processes of reiteration in literary texts, the literature of the Axis War will be analysed through the various forms of repetition that characterise the selected texts. Structurally the study will move from the most typified, and recurrent of these reiterated elements to the most complex and infrequent ones.

Chapter Two will address the most common way in which the Axis War has been addressed by Italian culture: through an omission, which relegates this war to the margins of both the cultural field and the memory discourse of World War II. To highlight and discuss this crucial aspect this chapter deals with the idea of silence, which will offer an operative metaphor to shed light on different ways in which the Axis War has been dismissed in postwar Italy. The chapter will initially show the marginal role that this war obtained within the Italian collective memory of World War II and its limited mediation across Italian culture; it will then analyse the ways in which it was silenced in the texts of both the secondary corpus and the main one.

The subsequent two chapters will deal with the main forms of repetition within the texts of the main corpus. Francesco Orlando has pointed out that when someone notices the presence of a series of recurrent elements in literary texts, there are three different attitudes that may be adopted: one could disregard them as having no real importance; could limit the aim of the research to a catalogue that either proves or disproves the existence of similar repetitions; or could take

their existence as a starting point and set out to understand why these repetitions are there.²⁴

Chapters Three and Four follow the last two options indicated by Orlando. Chapter Three will identify the presence of four recurrent topoi across the literature of the Axis War. Chapter Four will deal with some of the main themes developed by the texts, which will help shed light on the reasons why these topoi became central elements of the Italian representation of the Axis War.

Chapter Five deals with other, more complex forms of repetition. By re-using some theoretical concepts developed in Chapter Two for the study of silence within literary texts, this chapter will show the textual strategies through which the representation of Italian violence and Italian guilt have been consistently glossed over and minimised across the texts of the main corpus. This process will be linked to the formation of two typified plots, which will be explored through the concept of the masterplot, a narrative device constituting a further form of repetition within the literature of the Axis War.

The last short chapter that concludes this work, which has been labelled the Epilogue, analyses the few texts that, despite reusing many of the typified elements that are discussed throughout the thesis, develop a representation of the war that significantly diverts from the rest of the corpus. These narratives constitute an exception to the overbearing depiction of the Axis War upheld by the texts of the main corpus and

²⁴ F. Orlando, "'Topoi' of Realism: The Metamorphosis of Colours', in W. Sollors, ed., *The Return of Thematic Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 212.

prove the existence of a minority view on the war both within cultural depiction and across Italian society.

Throughout the chapters, the Italian collective memory of World War II, despite not being the main object of enquiry, will constitute the common thread of the study. Besides those parts that directly deal with collective memory, reflections on this issue will be found in the conclusions of each chapter. These conclusions will highlight the connections between the representations of the literary texts discussed in the chapters and the collective memories that were formed and circulated in postwar Italy and that have been discussed by historians. By integrating historical enquiries, theories of memory, and literary analysis, this thesis hopes to shed light on the fundamental contribution of cultural production to the construction, negotiation, diffusion, and dissemination of a memory of the past.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Collective Memories

'Swann [...] admirait la terrible puissance récréatrice de sa mémoire'.¹

Introduction

The study of memory represents a vast, multifaceted, multidisciplinary, and increasingly interdisciplinary area of academic research, which converges in the field of Memory Studies. Scholars who have tried to map this field have identified two separate periods, usually called 'waves', during which the study of memory has burgeoned.²

The 'first wave' of Memory Studies refers roughly to the span of time between the end of the nineteenth century and the early 1940s.³ During this phase prominent scholars such as philosophers Henry Bergson and Edmund Husserl, the father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, the forerunner of modern psychology Frederic Bartlett, sociologists Émile Durkheim and Maurice Halbwachs, historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, and cultural historian Aby Warburg, published

¹ M. Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), I, p. 362.

² See the introductions of the following works: J. M. Rossington, A. Whitehead, eds., *Theories of Memory: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 5; A. Erll, A. Nünning, eds., *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2010), p. 8; Olick, V. Vinitzky-Seroussi, D. Levy, eds., *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2011), p. 3.

³ For a cultural and historical explanation of the rise of memory studies see R. Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and The Memory Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); J. Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 1-3.

works about memory and laid the foundation for the contemporary understanding of this complex phenomenon.⁴

The 'second wave' of Memory Studies refers to an ongoing phase that began in the 1980s, opened by a debate on the relationship between history and memory — fostered by Pierre Nora's conceptualisation of French history through a series of 'lieux de mémoire'⁵ — and by the rediscovery of the works of Halbwachs.⁶ Since this early stage, which Andreas Huyssen has labelled as the 'memory boom', the study of memory has grown exponentially and has evolved into multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary enquiries spanning various academic disciplines such as Psychoanalysis, Cognitive Psychology, Neuroscience, Sociology, Anthropology, Oral History, Holocaust Studies, Literary and Cultural Studies, Heritage Studies, and Cultural Geography.

By the 2010s Memory Studies remain an open field of research, where scholars from various areas, with varied methodologies and different aims, enter into dialogue without any obliged path to follow.⁷ This multidisciplinary theoretical wealth, though, has often been to the

⁴ Obviously theories of memory were developed before the contemporary era and played an important part in both classical and early modern cultures: see Rossington, Whitehead, *Theories of Memory*, pp. 19-132; M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁵ P. Nora, M. Agulhon, C. R. Ageron, C. Beaune, eds., *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 7 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992).

⁶ M. Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1925); Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950).

⁷ S. Radstone, B. Schwarz, 'Introduction: Mapping Memory', in Radstone, Schwarz, eds., *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 6-7.

detriment of the creation of a shared academic language, as several scholars have noted.⁸

In 2008, in the opening number of the journal *Memory Studies*, Olick lamented the lack of theoretical agreement on the nature of memory within the humanities, a fact that constantly forces scholars to ‘reinvent the wheel’ in their first chapters or in the footnotes.⁹ This chapter will be no exception. The following pages will combine conceptualisations formulated in the last twenty years by several scholars in order to develop a terminology for the study of collective memory that will be upheld throughout this study.

The first part of this chapter is composed of seven short sections that are entirely devoted to the theorization of collective memory: section one considers two different ways of conceiving of this notion; sections two outlines the particular understanding that this thesis enforces; section three, four, and five focus respectively on the subject of the collective memory process, on the concept of memory narratives, and on the object of collective memory; sections six and seven address the ways in which collective memories are negotiated and communicated in the public sphere.

The second part of this chapter addresses the relationship between collective memory and cultural production: section eight

⁸ W. Kansteiner, ‘Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies’, *History and Theory*, 41.2 (2002), 179-197; K. Klein, ‘On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse’, *Representations*, 69 (2000), 127-150; Winter, *Remembering War*, p. 3; Erll, *Memory in Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 6.

⁹ Olick, “‘Collective Memory’: A Memoir and Prospect”, *Memory Studies*, 1.1 (2008), 23-29 (p. 26).

illustrates the role that cultural products play in the process of collective memory formation; section nine, finally, will develop a tailored methodology for the study of literature in relation to collective memory.

1.1 Mapping the Study of Collective Memory: Collectivist and Collected Approaches

As a starting point, it is necessary to note that there are two levels from which memory phenomena can be examined, the individual level and the collective one. The term individual memory is not usually defined within the scholarship, but is used intuitively: it addresses the memory process from the point of view of an individual being and it refers to what that particular person remembers. The term collective memory appears immediately more complex. Undoubtedly, it is used to address memory as an extra-individual phenomenon; however this notion tends to be understood in heterogeneous ways.

With a clear reference to Charles Percy Snow's famous work, Olick has talked about the existence of 'two cultures' within Memory Studies, meaning two divergent approaches to the idea of collective memory. The first is what Olick calls 'collected memory': according to this interpretation collective memories are a series of memories that are shared by a given group of people.¹⁰ These memories can be collectively and socially constructed, but always relate to mental images existing in

¹⁰ Olick, 'Collective Memory: The Two Cultures', *Sociological Theory*, 17.3 (1999), 333-348 (p. 338).

the minds of the group members, who are individually able to remember these things. This approach situates collective memory 'in the head' of the people and sees the individuals as the only possible subject of the memory process.¹¹ Anna Green notes that this particular understanding tends to be more widespread in historical works and in the field of Oral History in particular.¹²

The second approach instead sees collective memory as something detached from what exists in the minds of people. Olick refers to this interpretation with the term 'collective memory', but, to avoid confusion, it is better to call it 'collectivist memory', as suggested by Ineke Wessel and Michelle Moulds.¹³ According to this view, rather than in the minds of individuals, collective memories are situated 'in the world' and they are embodied in a series of socially constructed paradigms, narratives, frameworks, and schemata that shape the ways individuals conceive of the past.

This latter approach is more widespread among sociological and cultural studies, which tend to adopt what historian Kerwin Klein has considered as a structuralist perspective: works following this approach show little interest in what people actually remember and in the neurological and psychological understanding of how memory works; instead they focus on the observation and analysis of habits,

¹¹ W. Hirst, D. Manier, 'Towards a Psychology of Collective Memory', *Memory*, 16.3 (2008), 183-200 (p. 185).

¹² A. Green, 'Individual Remembering and "Collective Memory": Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates', *Oral History*, 32.2 (2004), 35-44 (p. 37).

¹³ Olick, 'Collective Memory: The Two Cultures', *Sociological Theory*, p. 338. I. Wessel, M. Moulds, 'Collective Memory: A Perspective from (Experimental) Clinical Psychology', *Memory*, 16.3 (2008), 288-304 (p. 289).

commemorative practices, and cultural products, which are addressed as direct embodiments of collective memory.¹⁴

The difference between the collected approach and the collectivist one may lead to extremely divergent positions. Within the field of Memory Studies it is possible to find scholars, such as Schudson, claiming that 'there is not such a thing as individual memory' and others, such as Susan Sontag, arguing the opposite, claiming that 'strictly speaking, there is no such a thing as collective memory'.¹⁵ Obviously these positions are usually nuanced and those in favour of the collected approach recognise the importance of the social aspects of memory, just as those in favour of a collectivist perspective do not deny the individuals' role completely. Nevertheless, a theoretical distance between these two views remains, generating divergent methodological choices.

1.2 The Understanding of Collective Memory in the Present Work

The present work develops an understanding of collective memory based on the approach defined by Olick as collected memory, which implies that memories are always located in the minds of people. This theoretical choice results in some important consequences.

¹⁴ Klein, 'On the Emergence of Memory', *Representations*, p. 131. See also B. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), p. 6.

¹⁵ Schudson, 'Dynamic of Distortion in Collective Memory', in *Memory Distortion*, p. 346; S. Sontag quoted in S. R. Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 3.

First of all, when using a collected approach the notion of collective memory can be equated to the idea of 'group memory', a concept addressing those memories that are remembered not simply by individuals, but by several people forming a group. Historian Jay Winter posits a similar understanding of collective memory when he claims that:

States do not remember; individuals do, in associations with other people. If the term 'collective memory' has any meaning at all, it is the process through which different collectives, from groups of two to groups in their thousands, engage in acts of remembrance together.¹⁶

By adopting the notion of group memory collective memories can be seen as a series of memories that are remembered by several people who are individually able to remember them.¹⁷ The group members who participate in the construction of a group memory form what David Middleton and Derek Edwards call a 'community of memory'.¹⁸

Another important implication of using a collected approach is the fact that individuals are seen as the fundamental carriers of collective memories. As a result of this perspective individual memory becomes the basis on which collective memory is built and, therefore, it appears theoretically acceptable to draw insights on how memory works at the collective level from studies carried out on individual memory. This is why this thesis will also rely on conceptions developed within the fields of

¹⁶ Winter, *Remembering War*, p 4.

¹⁷ Obviously the notion of group memory does not imply that the memories of the group members are identical; but rather that they present enough similarities to be linked together. The complexity of this phenomenon requires more refined theoretical tools that will be discussed throughout this chapter.

¹⁸ Middleton and Edwards' concept is discussed in Peitsch, 'Introduction', in *European Memories*, p. xxiv. Similarly, Misztal speaks about 'mnemonic community', Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, p. 15.

Neuroscience and Cognitive Psychology, which will be used to shed light on the dynamics of collective memory.¹⁹

The prominence given to individual memory does not mean that collective memory can be entirely conflated into the former. Although the existence of a given group memory depends on the individual memories carried by the group members, collective memory maintains its specificity. First of all, each individual group member remembers only a portion of what the collective remembers as a whole. Moreover, the wealth of information that is preserved at the collective level constitutes a pool of data that can be passed down to the group members and can thus influence the way the individual remembers the past.

Cognitive Psychology offers strong evidence of the fact that individual memory is highly affected by collective factors. In his pioneering studies in the 1930s, Bartlett argued that individual memories are formed in relation to a series of socially constructed 'schemata' that give meanings to life experiences and affect the ways in which information is both memorised and later remembered.²⁰ The cultural and historical origin of such schemata implies that it is impossible to understand individual memory without considering the social and

¹⁹ This appears plausible only by adopting a collected approach. For instance Kansteiner, who considers collective memory as an entity with 'no organic basis' and, therefore, does not adopt a collected approach to collective memory, has criticised the use of psychological terminology in the understanding of collective phenomena, Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in Memory', *History and Theory*, p. 185.

²⁰ F. Bartlett, *Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932; repr. 1995), pp. 199-214.

cultural context: as oral historian Alistair Thompson puts it, memory is always 'both social and psychological as well as neurological'.²¹

The dependence of individual memory on collective factors, together with the previously underlined dependency of collective memory on the individual carriers, leads to the recognition of a complex dual relationship between the individual and the collective levels, which can be described through what sociologist Barbara Misztal has labelled as the 'intersubjectivist' view.²² Misztal argues that the act of remembering is 'constructed from cultural forms and constrained by our social context', but always remains 'an individual mental act'.²³ In other words, the individual memories of the group members and the collective memory of the group mutually sustain each other: the existence of a group memory depends on the individual memories of the people that form the given group; vice versa, the group memory constitutes a framework that, through social interactions, can be passed down to the group members and shape what they remember.

1.3 The Subject of Collective Memory

The concept of group memory entails the notion of the 'group', a collective subject that remains an often confused and problematic actor. In fact,

²¹ A. Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering in Oral History', in D. Ritchie, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 87.

²² Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, pp. 5-6, 10-11. See also P. Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 393.

²³ Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, p. 11.

many types of groups can be identified within a social context, from the small nucleus represented by a family, to the larger — and therefore looser and more questionable — ones represented by nations and supranational organizations. Similarly, it is possible to identify different groups by different features: e.g. class-based, gender-based, ethnically-based, political, and generational communities. In other words, the idea of the group constitutes what historian Geoffrey Cubitt considers as ‘an extremely general social category’ that relates to the complex notion of ‘social identity’.²⁴

Green defines social identities as those identities that are ‘created through relationships with other people’.²⁵ According to Cubitt, within a social context a group can be identified by ‘being embroiled in a certain set of structured social interactions’ and having ‘a sense of this embroilment’.²⁶ Memory and identity appear closely correlated, since, as anthropologist Michael Lambek puts it, they ‘serve to mutually validate each other’.²⁷ Memory is the faculty that allows individuals to perceive a sense of continuity with their past selves and, therefore, it allows the construction and preservation of any identity.²⁸

²⁴ G. Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 132-133.

²⁵ A. Green, ‘Can Memory be Collective?’, in *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, p. 102.

²⁶ Cubitt, *History and Memory*, p. 132.

²⁷ M. Lambek, ‘The Past Imperfect: Remembering as Moral Practice’, in P. Antze, Lambek, eds., *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 243.

²⁸ See Q. Wang, ‘On the Cultural Constitution of Collective Memory’, *Memory*, 16.3 (2008), 305-317 (p. 307); J. Gillis, ‘Introduction: Memory and Identity the History of a Relationship’, in Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 3.

By linking collective memory to the social identity of groups that exist within a society, it appears clear that it is not possible to speak about a unique form of collective memory. By contrast, collective memory is always plural, since within a given social context there might be as many group memories as there are groups.

Several studies that have explored the diverse forms of collective memories that exist within a national community have focused especially on the differences existing between an 'official memory' — a term referring to the representation of the past promoted by the institutions of the state — and those upheld by local communities, which have been indicated by terms such as 'vernacular memory' and 'counter-memory'.²⁹ However, as Nicolas Argenti and Katharina Schramm point out, these discrepancies are much more complex and numerous than a centre-periphery relationship.³⁰

Within any community of memory there are always tensions between different ways of remembering the past, which reflect the sub-groups that form that community. For example, historian Henry Rousso, in his study on the collective memory of Vichy in postwar France, has underlined the existence of different sub-groups within the French

²⁹ J. Bodnar, *Remaking America*, pp. 13-15. See also S. Mihelj, 'Between Official and Vernacular Remembering', in E. Keightley, M. Pickering, eds., *Research Methods for Memory Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 61-62; L. Noakes, J. Pattinson, 'Introduction', in Noakes, Pattinson, eds., *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 6.

³⁰ N. Argenti, K. Schramm, 'Introduction', in Argenti, Schramm, eds., *Remembering Violence: Anthropological Perspectives on Intergenerational Transmission* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), p. 18.

community of memory, such as prisoners of war, partisans, and deportees, resulting in different group memories.³¹

Yet, the differences that can be highlighted within a national group memory can actually be pinpointed within any of its sub-groups. Even the ideas of a POW group memory or a partisan group memory, as in Rousso's example, are multi-layered phenomena that cannot be conceived of in uniform and monolithic ways. Any community of memory, from the largest to the smallest, presents tensions and differences in the ways the group members remember the past.

This situation has been theoretically described by the authors of the collective work *Individual and Collective Memory Consolidation*:

Larger collectives are usually composed of multiple, and possibly overlapping, subgroups or factions. Because any collective can have a collective memory, all of the various subgroups within a collective, including the collective as a whole, can have their own collective memories, and there is no requirement that the various subgroup memories be consistent with one another.³²

Any sub-group is both an entity that participates in the creation of the group memory of the larger community to which the sub-group belongs and, at the same time, a community of memory in itself, which presents tensions and divisions within.

This understanding of group memory, however, can be further problematized. In fact an individual belongs simultaneously to different

³¹ H. Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 4.

³² T. Anastasio, K. A. Ehrenberger, P. Watson, W. Zhang, *Individual and Collective Memory Consolidation: Analogous Processes on Different Levels* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012), p. 152.

groups and relates, therefore, to different group memories.³³ Depending on a person's various social identities that person will tap into several group memories, will be influenced by them, and reciprocally partake in their construction and conservation.

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that social groups are not isolated entities, but they are entangled and mutually influence each other. Within a given social context the diverse memories of different groups interact with each other and may have an effect on the memories of members of other groups, who are subject in this way to what literary scholar Michael Rothberg has called 'multidirectional influences'.³⁴ Given the complex and intricate nature of group memories, it is necessary to find a way of approaching such multifaceted and elusive phenomena. A feasible solution is offered by the fact that group memories are strongly linked to narratives.

1.4 Memory Narratives and Memory Discourse

Scholars in various disciplines have stressed the importance of narratives for the formation of collective memory. For instance psychologist Jerome Bruner has noted that 'we organise our experience and our memory of

³³ Ibid, pp. 49, 153. See also Erll, *Memory in Culture*, p. 110; Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 85.

³⁴ M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

human happening mainly in the form of narrative’;³⁵ similarly, cultural historian Graham Dawson has argued that memories can be ‘composed’ into coherent narratives and in this way they can be communicated.³⁶ Jan Assmann has considered the narrativisation of memory so essential for the memory process that he suggests calling the collective memory of a given group ‘communicative memory’, since it is a memory that is formed as a result of communication among the group members through narratives about the past.³⁷

The fact that memories can be composed in speech acts and communicated to other people is of extreme relevance, not only for the creation and maintenance of a group memory, but also for its study.³⁸ Scholars working with memories have coined several terms to stress the narrative nature of their object of enquiry: Joanna Bourke has stated that what are usually referred to with the terminology of memory are actually ‘shared narratives of the past’;³⁹ Alistair Thompson has spoken about ‘memory stories’ referring to the narratives people relate about what they

³⁵ J. Bruner, ‘The Narrative Construction of Reality’, in M. Mateas, P. Sengers, eds., *Narrative Intelligence* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2003), p. 44.

³⁶ G. Dawson, quoted by Noakes, Pattinson, ‘Introduction’, in *British Cultural Memory*, p. 9.

³⁷ J. Assmann, J. Czaplicka, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity’, *New German Critique*, 65 (1995), 125-133 (p. 126). This idea has been better developed in J. Assmann, ‘Communicative and Cultural Memory’, in *Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, pp. 109-118.

³⁸ The possibility of narrating what one remembers concerns only what neuroscientists have called ‘explicit memory’ or ‘declarative memory’, see A. P. Shimamura, L. R. Squire, ‘A Neuropsychological Study of Fact Memory and Source Amnesia’, *ibid.*, 464-473. See also A. Baddeley, *Human Memory: Theory and Practice* (Hove: Psychology Press, 1997), pp. 351-359; H. Markowitsch, ‘Cultural Memory and the Neurosciences’, in *Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, p. 277. On the difference between ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’ memories see Schacter, ‘Implicit Memory: History and Current Status’, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 13 (1987), 501-518.

³⁹ J. Bourke, ‘Introduction: “Remembering” War’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39.4 (2004), 473-485 (p. 473).

remember;⁴⁰ other scholars, such as Rosalind Shaw, Stephanie Bird, Mary Fulbrook, Julia Wagner, and Christiane Wienand have instead used the term 'memory narrative'.⁴¹

This thesis will adopt this latter concept, which will be used to refer to the stories that people articulate in order to communicate what they remember of the past. The notion of memory narratives highlights that working on collective memories means studying the narratives that circulate within a given community of memory. These narratives are always plural. However, as a result of social interactions among the group members, some of them may obtain greater diffusion, while others may remain largely unknown. In order to highlight the different degrees of dissemination and success that the narratives of the past can achieve within a community of memory, the present work will distinguish between, 'dominant memory narratives' and 'marginal memory narratives'.

This distinction helps to underline that what is usually assumed as the group memory of a given social group is actually the dominant memory narrative that exists within that group. This dominant narrative, on the one hand, is supported by a large portion of the group members who believe in its validity and, on the other hand, also tends to be known by those group members who are carriers of divergent memory

⁴⁰ Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering', in *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, p. 90. See also Cubitt, *History and Memory*, p. 95.

⁴¹ R. Shaw 'Afterword: Violence and the Generation of Memory', in *Remembering Violence*, p. 251;

S. Bird, M. Fulbrook, J. Wagner, C. Wienand, 'Introduction: Disturbing Pasts', in Bird, Fulbrook, Wagner, Wienand, eds., *Reverberations of Nazi Violence in Germany and Beyond: Disturbing Pasts* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 6.

narratives.⁴² Besides the dominant one, though, other narratives exist within the same community of memory.

Moreover, this thesis will also use the term 'memory discourse' in order to refer to the memory narratives related to a given subject that circulate within a community of memory at a certain time and whose negotiations by the group members result in the formation of a dominant narrative about the past. The term memory discourse, therefore, indicates both the totality of the memory narratives and the result of their social negotiation into a dominant story. It will be used in the singular form, but it always entails the existence of a plurality of narratives that acquire more or less power: some of them obtain centrality within the discourse, while others remain at its margin.

The choice to use the term discourse, by evoking Foucault's idea of 'discursive formations', highlights the fact that the dominant position that a memory narrative can obtain is strongly linked to the relations of power that affect a particular community of memory, as it will be discussed in the next sections.⁴³

⁴² See Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, p. 51. On the importance of a person's belief that what he or she remembers is true see the reflections of Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, pp. 163, 278; Todorov, *Hope and Memory*, p. 129.

⁴³ M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1971), pp. 31-39.

1.5 The Object of the Collective Memory Process

Margalit argues that memory, rather than being always 'about the past' as Aristotle famously wrote, is always 'from the past'.⁴⁴ Memory is a faculty that operates in the present, but that allows the retrieval of information that comes from the past. The 'pastness' of what is remembered is indeed one of the central features of the memory process. However, the types of information that people are able to recall are various. In order to understand this point it is key to consider the distinction developed by psychologists and neuroscientists between 'episodic memory' and 'semantic memory'.⁴⁵

The term semantic memory refers to any information that is retrieved without any reference to the specific moment at which one learned that piece of information. By contrast, the term episodic memory concerns a form of memory that always involves remembering a particular time and a particular place in which the subject first experienced the remembered event.⁴⁶ These two types of memories address two different kinds of information coming from the past: in everyday language it is above all the second one that receives the label of

⁴⁴ Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, p. 14.

⁴⁵ E. Tulving, 'Concepts of Memory', in *Oxford Handbook of Memory*, pp. 33-45. See also Tulving, *Elements of Episodic Memory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); Schacter, Tulving, *Memory Systems*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

⁴⁶ Manier, Hirst, 'A Cognitive Taxonomy of Collective Memories', in *Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, pp. 253-261. See also M. O'Shea, *The Brain: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) pp. 87-97.

memory, while information processed as semantic memory is usually referred to as knowledge.⁴⁷

David Manier and William Hirst advocate the use of a similar differentiation in the study of collective memory, speaking of forms of 'collective episodic memory' and 'collective semantic memory'.⁴⁸ The term collective episodic memory refers to memories of events that have been directly experienced by the group members. Collective semantic memory, instead, concerns information about events of the past that have not been directly experienced by the people who remember them. The latter could be understood as knowledge of the past; however, as Manier and Hirst note, while much knowledge of the past is simply treated as such, within a community of memory there are also specific pieces of knowledge that are seen and treated as forms of memory.

Knowledge of certain events of the past is considered a form of memory when the events considered acquire a particular significance for the members of a given community, usually when they are felt to be important for their sense of identity. For this reason Jan Assmann argues that:

Memory is knowledge with an identity-index, it is knowledge about oneself, that is, one's own diachronic identity, be it as an individual or as a member of a family, a generation, a community, a nation, or a cultural and religious tradition.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Erll, *Memory in Culture*, p. 84.

⁴⁸ Manier, Hirst, 'A Cognitive Taxonomy', in *Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, p. 259.

⁴⁹ J. Assmann, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory', in *Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, p. 114.

When this identity mark is absent, the information is usually perceived simply as a piece of knowledge and not as a part of the community's collective memory.

The attribution of this identity-index to certain pieces of knowledge about the past is the result of ideological and cultural constructions that are largely based on identification processes. Group members of the present identify with groups of the past, establish a sense of continuity with these groups, and consider the events experienced by them as contents of the collective semantic memory of their own present community. Hence, it can be argued that a past event becomes the object of collective semantic memory mainly when it was experienced by a collective group with whom those who remember identify.

This process of identification is based on what Benedict Anderson has defined as an act of imagination.⁵⁰ According to Anderson a community 'is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'.⁵¹ Although Anderson's argument concerns above all the sense of national identity that people feel toward their fellow citizens in the present time, this act of imagination is pivotal for any type of group identity, and also affects the way people look at the past. Indeed, as Margalit argues, a community of memory is 'based not only on actual thick relations to the

⁵⁰ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983; revised edn 2016), pp. 199-200.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

living, but also on thick relations to the dead', since people also imagine and feel that they are bound to communities of the past.⁵²

As a result of these acts of imagination and identification, the members of a given community of memory treat the knowledge of particular past events experienced by the communities of the past with whom they identify as parts of their group's collective semantic memories. This identification process implies that any past event could become the object of the collective semantic memory of a given group, as long as there are group members who consider that past event important for their identities.

This means that there is no ontological difference between past events belonging to collective semantic memory and those that do not. The only distinction is that members of a given community consider certain events in a particular way, as something that belongs to the past of the group. As Suleiman points out, collective memories are based on a 'stipulation of what is important for a group'.⁵³ The possible contents of collective semantic memory, therefore, are always questionable, negotiable, and subject to change.

⁵² Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, p. 69.

⁵³ S. R. Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 4.

1.6 Tensions, Negotiations, Changes

Tensions within group memories are a pivotal feature of the collective memory process, since they allow a group memory to change over the course of time. Indeed memories — both at the individual level and at the collective one — are not stable entities. Neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists have shown that memory is not a passive faculty, but an active and creative one.⁵⁴ Nowadays scholars do not conceive of memory simply as the capacity to retrieve something that was previously stored in the mind, as the traditional metaphor of the ‘storehouse’ would suggest.⁵⁵ Instead, memory is understood as a constructivist process.

Current neuroscience research has shown that when a person remembers something the mind recreates the perception of that moment by reactivating the neural pathways that were triggered by that particular experience.⁵⁶ This means that at every recall a memory is reconstructed, not simply retrieved. An extremely significant consequence of the constructivist nature of memories is that during the process of retrieval new neural connections may be added to the neural pathway related to a particular memory, resulting in its permanent modification.⁵⁷ Present

⁵⁴ See Cubitt, *History and Memory*, pp. 79-80.

⁵⁵ St. Augustine described memory as a palace, or a storehouse, where information on the past is preserved, see *The Confession of St. Augustine*, book 10, part 8.

⁵⁶ S. Rose ‘Memories are Made of This’, in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, p. 207; A. Winter, *Memory: Fragments of a Modern History* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), pp. 258-261.

⁵⁷ The now classic experiment that proved that new elements can be interpolated in past memories is E. Loftus, J. Palmer, ‘Reconstruction of Auto-Mobile Destruction: An Example of the Interaction between Language and Memory’, *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour*, 13 (1974), 585-589. See also J. Foster, *Memory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 61-83.

concerns, emotions, wishes, fantasies, rationalization processes, unconscious desires, and social paradigms, all affect the way a person remembers the past, and when these elements change, memories may also be affected and modified.

If these changes are possible, it is because memory is not simply the capacity to recover traces of the past, but an active faculty. As Bartlett has shown, it is not possible to completely separate memory from reasoning. In fact, memory involves imagination and rationalization processes in the attempt to reconstruct what happened. In the words of Bartlett:

Remembering is not the re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless and fragmentary traces. It is an imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of the relation of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organized past reactions or experience, and to a little outstanding detail which commonly appears in image or in language form.⁵⁸

Remembering often consists in reflecting on what may have happened on the basis of the few traces of the past that survive in recollection. For this reason Alessandro Portelli has defined memory as the faculty whereby people try to make sense of their past.⁵⁹ Understanding the past through memory is an activity that is constrained by the traces of what one remembers, but that is also strongly affected by the present conditions in which the act of remembering takes place.

⁵⁸ Bartlett, *Remembering*, p. 213.

⁵⁹ A. Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', in R. Perks, A. Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 69. See also Argenti, Schramm, 'Introduction', in *Remembering Violence*, p. 17.

This aptness to change and adjust characterises memory at the individual level as much as at the collective one. Group memories are not stable and fixed, but are the result of discussions and negotiations among group members. Over the course of time narratives that are at the margin of a memory discourse can obtain much more recognition and be foregrounded; on the contrary, memory narratives that appear significant for a community in a given moment of time can be marginalised later on.

Susan Suleiman has spoken about 'crises of memory' in reference to the historical moments in which the memory of a particular community undergoes a conspicuous stage of revision and renegotiation.⁶⁰ Variations in the community, in the power structure, in the values of an epoch, and in the systems of beliefs may all change the ways in which a particular group identifies with the past and, as a consequence, modify the memory discourse of that community.

Since these changes happen mainly in the public sphere, through negotiations among individuals, several scholars have referred to group memories with the term 'public memory', a term that has the advantage of stressing the social nature of the construction of these narratives.⁶¹

The process of redefinition of a group memory and the rebalance among different sub-narratives that exist within the group are the result of a series of actions carried out by the group members. In fact, as literary scholar Nancy Wood argues, the diffusion of a memory narrative is always related to a particular intentionality, it 'testifies to a will or desire on the

⁶⁰ Suleiman, *Crises of Memory*, pp. 1-5.

⁶¹ J. Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 100.

part of some social group or disposition of power to select and organise representations of the past'.⁶² Some memory narratives acquire prominence within a given community because there are individuals that sustain them; they last because there are people who both believe in them and reaffirm them; they change across time because someone actively objects to a given dominant narrative and endorses a different way of conceiving of the past.

Scholars have coined several terms to indicate those people who play an active part in the process of creation, diffusion, and negotiation of particular memory narratives: for instance, historian Carol Gluck has spoken about 'memory activists';⁶³ Serge Barcellini and Annette Wieviorka have talked about 'actors' or 'agents' of memory.⁶⁴ Since every individual carries particular memories and partakes in the maintenance, negotiation, and modification of the memory of the groups to which she or he belongs, any group member can be considered as an agent of memory. However, some individuals and groups possess more power and influence than others; hence, it is necessary to use a terminology that can stress this difference.

Collective memories, indeed, are strongly related to the relations of power that affect a community of memory: they are, in Bourke's terms,

⁶² N. Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), p. 2.

⁶³ Quoted in J. Winter, 'Representations of War and the Social Construction of Silence', in E. V. Baraban, S. Jaeger, A. Muller, eds., *Fighting Words and Images: Representing War across the Disciplines* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), p. 34.

⁶⁴ Quoted in R. C. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture: 1944-2010* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 28.

‘shared narratives infused with power relations’.⁶⁵ The crucial role that power plays in the negotiation of memory narratives is the reason why this thesis, rather than talking about agents or actors of memory, will speak mainly about ‘carrier groups’, a notion that has the advantage of pointing out the asymmetrical distribution of power among individual carriers of memories.⁶⁶

Jeffrey Alexander defines carrier groups as people who ‘are situated in particular places in the social structure’, and that ‘have particular discursive talents for articulating their claims — for what might be called “meaning making” — in the public sphere’.⁶⁷ Carrier groups may include political leaders, teachers, journalists, historians, scholars, religious figures, intellectuals, artists, activists, bloggers, Youtubers, or any public figure that is able to construct and spread a particular memory narrative from a position of power and transmit it to other people.

1.7 Transmitting and Negotiating Memories

At first glance, the idea that memories can be transmitted from one person to another may appear problematic. In order to grasp this process it is important to consider the distinction that Margalit develops between

⁶⁵ Bourke, ‘Introduction: “Remembering” War’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, p. 474.

⁶⁶ This concept has been originally developed by Max Weber for the description of the sociology of religion: M. Weber, ‘Religious Groups: The Sociology of Religion’, in Weber, G. Roth, C. Wittich, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 399-634.

⁶⁷ J. Alexander, ‘Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma’, in Alexander, ed., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2004), p. 11.

'common memory' and 'shared memory'.⁶⁸ The former idea refers to memories that several people have in common because they individually went through the same experience and then are able to remember it. This concept corresponds entirely to the idea of collective episodic memory previously analysed.

The concept of shared memory refers instead to memories that are shared not because they are the result of common experiences, but as a result of communication. Margalit uses the example of people gathered in a public space on the occasion of a particularly important historical event. Those who were there will develop a common memory of the event. Yet, it is thanks to communication that the memory of the event can be passed on to those who did not take part in it directly as shared memories.⁶⁹

The distinction between episodic memory and semantic memory helps clarify this process. In the case of shared memories, what passes from an individual to another is not the same form of mental image. An episodic memory cannot be transmitted as such to someone that did not go through the same experience; however, that particular memory can be communicated through a speech act and someone else can assimilate it as a form of semantic memory.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, p. 51.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 52.

⁷⁰ In the process of memory transmission from one person to another the episodic memory of the receiver is also involved and can play an important part. Marianne Hirsch, who has coined the term 'postmemory' in order to investigate the memories that survivors of traumatic experiences can pass down to their children, has shown the effects that these emotionally charged transmissions can have on the receivers, affecting both their episodic and implicit memories. See M. Hirsch, 'Postmémoire', in *Témoigner: entre histoire et mémoire*, 118 (2014), 205-206; Hirsch, 'Projected Memory', in M. Bal, J. Crewe, L. Spitzer, eds., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover; London: University Press of New England, 1999), p. 9.

Once the distinction between episodic memory and semantic memory is established, the idea that memories can be shared becomes less problematic. Episodic memories can be communicated and shared in the forms of narratives to other group members, who become able to remember them as forms of semantic memories. In this way a group memory of an event is formed. Some members would carry only semantic memories of that event, while others, who directly experienced it, would carry episodic memories as well.

The study of the development of memory at the collective level shows a movement from episodic memory to semantic memory.⁷¹ The semantic memories that, at a given moment in time, the members of a certain group recollect have their roots in the episodic memories of other members of that community who have passed them on through communications. As Cubitt points out:

Individual memory is crucially involved in generating the information that passes between generations: nothing enters the social food-chain of transmission unless someone or other has at some time remembered it on the basis of personal experience and communicated this memory to others.⁷²

An important aspect of this passage from individual episodic memories to collective semantic memories is that through this process forms of

⁷¹ Alexander, 'Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma', in *Cultural Trauma*, p. 23. Interestingly, this movement is opposite to the one that seems to take place in the brain at level of individual memory, which seems to develop from semantic to episodic; see Baddeley, 'What is Autobiographical Memory?', in M. A. Conway, D. C. Rubin, H. Spinnler, W. A. Wagenaar, eds., *Theoretical Perspectives on Autobiographical Memory* (Dordrecht; London: Kluwer Academic, 1992), p. 19; Erll, *Memory in Culture*, p. 85.

⁷² Cubitt, *History and Memory*, p. 121.

distortion that may affect the episodic memory of an individual may also be transmitted at the collective level.

Individual memories, indeed, are often distorted. Psychologists Roy Baumeister and Stephen Hastings point out that processes of distortion are usually the result of a tendency to self-deception, through which individuals generally 'try to maintain a positive image of self'.⁷³ Through acts of memory communication such distortions can also pass to the collective level, where they are likely to be accepted and maintained by other group members, as people tend to create positive self-representations also of the groups to which they belong, in order to make the process of identification with the group easier and more comfortable.⁷⁴ As a result, Baumeister and Hastings have identified several 'patterns of distortions' within the collective memories of groups, which can be affected by selective omissions, exaggerations, embellishments, manipulations of associations, and externalizations of responsibilities.⁷⁵

These psychological processes are one of the reasons why memory narratives related to different events can present, at times, common features, which can be generated by similar types of distortions. Another factor that facilitates the creation of common traits in the ways the past is remembered has to do with the cultural system within which the memory

⁷³ R. Baumeister, S. Hastings, 'Distortions of Collective Memory: How Groups Flatter and Deceive Themselves', in J. Pennebaker, D. Paez, B. Rimé, eds., *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives* (New York; London: Psychology Press, 2013), p. 276.

⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 278.

⁷⁵ Ibid pp. 282-292.

narratives are negotiated. Psychologist James Wertsch, who has investigated the recurrent structures that characterise the memory narratives of different groups, has argued that collective memories are composed by the junction of 'specific narratives' and 'schematic narrative templates'.⁷⁶ While the first are specific pieces of information that relate only to the particular event that is remembered, the second consist of a series of patterns, schemata, and stereotypes that are not related to the event itself, but that stem from the cultural background of the person who remembers.⁷⁷

The presence of these schematic narrative templates in the articulation of memory narratives is the reason why collective memories are often affected by stereotypical features and recurrent patterns. In fact, as Erll has stressed, remembering represents a 'constructive narrative process deeply imbued with — often unacknowledged — patterns of culture and ideology'.⁷⁸

1.8 The Role of Cultural Production

Many studies that investigate matters of memory through the examination of cultural artifacts tend to adopt a collectivist approach to

⁷⁶ J. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 87-117.

⁷⁷ Wertsch, 'The Narrative Organization of Collective Memory', *Ethos*, 36.1 (2008), 120-135 (pp. 122-124).

⁷⁸ Erll, *Memory in Culture*, p. 39.

collective memory, rather than a collected one.⁷⁹ Similar works address memory as a world-based phenomenon, overlook the question of what people remember, and address only the cultural production which is treated as a form of 'cultural memory'.⁸⁰

A similar perspective leads to considerations that diverge from the assumptions followed by the present thesis: for instance in one of her work on cultural memory Aleida Assmann speaks about 'the memory of places', an expression that she finds both convenient and evocative:

Convenient because it leaves open the question of whether this is a *genitivus objectivus*, meaning that we remember places, or a *genitivus subjectivus*, meaning that places retain memories. It is evocative because it suggests the possibility that places themselves may become the agents and bearers of memory, endowed with a mnemonic power that far exceeds that of humans.⁸¹

This thesis takes issue with the idea that objects, places, or cultural products can be seen as agents of memory, or as memories themselves.⁸²

By adopting a collected approach to collective memory, this study locates

⁷⁹ See Green, 'Individual Remembering and "Collective Memory"', *Oral History*, p. 36.

⁸⁰ The collectivist approach seems to be particularly prevalent in German scholarship. The success of this approach within this academic tradition could also be related to language-based factors. In German the concept of memory is not expressed through a unitary term as in the majority of the languages that took up the Latin word 'memoria'; by contrast this concept is expressed by two different terms, i.e. 'Erinnerung' and 'Gedächtnis' which, in spite of being synonyms in certain occasions, also have a range of different meanings. The former refers mainly to the capacity of remembering; the latter to that of storing and saving information. This distinction may have fostered in German scholarship a text-based approach that aims to explore the collective and cultural forms of Gedächtnis. See A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, p. 139.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 281.

⁸² A reason why cultural artefacts are at times conflated with memories is that any material trace of the past is able to engender what Terdiman calls 'memory effect', which he defines as the human tendency to associate a given process to memory 'whenever anything is conserved and reappears in representation', Terdiman, *Present Past*, p. 8.

memory always in the minds of the people and considers the act of remembering as an act inescapably related to a human agent.

Yet adopting a collected approach does not imply that cultural products and material objects are not relevant for the memory process; by contrast, they play crucial roles in it. First of all it must be noted that written documents and other objects offer formidable aides for human memory, offering a storage that free mankind from the burden of keeping in mind countless pieces of information, which instead can be preserved within these items. Furthermore, objects and places often work as prompts, triggering in the mind of individuals a particular recollection that, otherwise, would not be recalled.

Moreover, material culture plays a key role in the transmission of memories. In fact memories can be shared and communicated not only through inter-individual communications, but also thanks to processes of 'mediation' and 'externalisation'.⁸³ Cubitt defines the latter as processes in which:

The data to be communicated are somehow encapsulated in objects or artefacts — texts, pictorial images, physical monuments, architectural features, electronic patterns, etc. — that are visible or tangible, durable, and in many cases replicable or transportable.⁸⁴

While memories can be encapsulated in a cultural product and be transmitted to other people by means of it, the object in itself cannot be

⁸³ See Erll, *Memory in Culture*, pp. 113-145.

⁸⁴ Cubitt, *History and Memory*, p. 121.

directly considered as a form of memory. As Susannah Radstone argues, with specific references to literary mediations:

Memory may be silently experienced, or it may be articulated through speech as well as through any number of written forms, including diary, memoir, autobiography or poetry. [...] It perhaps needs saying that none of these forms and genres are, in any simple or straightforward way, 'memory'. An autobiographical narrative is not, that is, memory. [...] It seems to need saying that literature remains literature, and a memorial statue continues to be a statue.⁸⁵

Adopting a collected approach to collective memory means bearing in mind that it is not possible to speak about memory without individual agents who are able to remember. Hence, the cultural products that, as a result mediation and externalisation processes, can transmit memories of the past to others should be treated with a terminology that does not conflate material culture and memories, but that, instead, gives emphasis to the capacity of these items to transmit representations of the past.⁸⁶

A similar approach has been developed by Paul Fussell who has spoken about written texts as 'means' that contribute to the formation of memory narratives; similarly Yoseph Yerushalmi has talked about 'vessels' and 'vehicles' of memory.⁸⁷ This thesis, in line with these

⁸⁵ S. Radstone, 'Reconceiving Binaries: The Limits of Memory', *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), 134-150 (pp. 135-136).

⁸⁶ This approach to cultural products in relation to collective memory has also been endorsed by Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture*, p. 8.

⁸⁷ P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975; repr. 2000) p. ix; Y. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle; London: University of Washington Press, 1982). See also A. Confino, 'Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Methods', *American Historical Review*, 102.5 (1997), 1386-1403 (p. 1386).

positions, will adopt the term 'vectors of memory', which was coined by Rousso and theorised by Wood.⁸⁸

By using this concept it becomes possible to talk about monuments, plaques, museums, public holidays, political speeches, ceremonies, religious functions, school textbooks, survivor testimonies, trials, documentaries, books, films, songs, theatrical performances, art exhibitions, historical accounts, academic scholarship, newspaper articles, television and radio programmes, and internet pages as vectors of memory, which are able to convey certain representations of the past to their audience, participating in this way in the construction and diffusion of memory narratives and in the negotiation of a memory discourse.

As a result of these conceptualisations, any cultural product can be seen, simultaneously, both as the result of an externalization process, through which certain memories of the past have been mediated into a material object, and as an item that circulates within a society and can convey those memories to others. Erll has discussed this double function of the cultural object with specific reference to literature, arguing that texts are, at the same time, 'memory-reflexive' and 'memory-productive'.⁸⁹

In order to explain this twofold function, Erll resorts to the conceptions of mimesis developed by Ricœur in *Temps et Récit*. She argues that literary texts are, firstly, the result of a process of 'prefiguration', through which authors have written them in accordance

⁸⁸ Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, p. 219; Wood, *Vectors of Memory*, pp. 5-6.

⁸⁹ Erll, *Memory in Culture*, p. 151.

with both their own memories and the memory narratives that circulate within their communities; secondly, they constitute a 'configuration' of a new memory narrative embedded in the text; thirdly, they are the possible source of a 'refiguration' through which readers can acquire information about the past.⁹⁰

This process implies that a literary text is both the product of the memory narratives that circulate in a society, which authors from their own perspective configure into a story, and a new medium that transmits a take on the past to its readers. As a result, Erll argues that literary texts can be studied both as exemplifications of certain memory narratives that circulate within society and as media that convey such narratives to others.⁹¹

In accordance with this view, in this thesis the Italian texts that form the literature of the Axis War will be treated both as the results of memory mediation processes — reflecting both the memory narratives that circulated in postwar Italy and that of their authors — and as vectors of memory that conveyed to their readers information about the past, contributing, in this way, to negotiating the memory narratives developed by the Italian community of memory.

It is important to point out that among the various types of vectors of memory, literary texts appear particularly valuable for the understanding of processes of collective memory. This relevance is linked

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 152.

⁹¹ Erll calls the former approach 'memory *in* literature', since memory narratives become observable within the texts, which are able to stage them; she calls the latter 'literature as a medium of cultural memory', since the text is able to convey to others a representation of the past, *ibid.*, pp. 68, 104, 151.

to three features of the literary object. The first concerns its narrative nature: since group memories are articulated and organised in narrative forms, the study of novels and short stories offers a series of exemplifications of discursive strategies through which the past has been narrativised, which often have parallels with the memory narratives developed by a community of memory.⁹²

The second feature is the selectivity that characterises literary depiction. Ricœur has underlined the correspondence between the necessary selective nature of both memory and narrative. He argues that as it is not possible to remember everything, so it is impossible to recount it; both narratives and memory inevitably contain 'a selective dimension'.⁹³ The study of what enters into literary representations can help us outline some of the ways in which the events of the past have been selected within a given culture.

Finally, a third reason why literature is important for the understanding of collective memory relates to its symbolic power. Literary texts possess the striking capacity of conferring meaning on the events they narrate. As Erll argues, in the reception of a literary text that deals with the past:

The referentializing movement in the reading process does not seem to be directed towards the pre-narrative reality of past

⁹² This is the reason why literary scholar Ofelia Ferrán has defined literary narratives as 'meta-memory texts', since they are able to illustrate the memory narratives developed by a certain community of memory in a given time, O. Ferrán, *Working Through Memory: Writing and Remembrance in Contemporary Spanish Narrative* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), p. 14.

⁹³ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 448.

events — as it is the case when reading historiographical texts — but rather towards the horizon of meaning'.⁹⁴

In other words, to their readers literary accounts about the past do not offer a view on what really happened, so much as they confer meaning on that past, providing meaningful ways of conceiving of it.

Literary critic Ann Rigney has stressed this aspect, by arguing that literature develops particularly memorable ways of conceiving of the past and therefore can play an important role in negotiating its significance.⁹⁵ Thanks to their cultural power literary texts give meaning to past events and, by doing so, they contribute to the formation and maintenance of certain memory narratives, and to the negotiation of the memory discourse of a given community of memory.

If literature has such great importance for the formation, maintenance and understanding of memory narratives, it is, however, key to find ways of studying it in relation to collective memory. In fact, despite the links that exist between what is mediated in cultural objects and the collective memory of a given community, this connection is never secure, but only possible.

For instance, one could consider the case of a historical novel. The novel is a vector of memory; it is a material entity in which information on the past has been stored and through which it can be transmitted to other people. The existence of the vector of memory, though, only stands for the possibility that this particular representation of the past could circulate

⁹⁴ Erll, *Memory in Culture*, p. 165.

⁹⁵ Rigney, 'The Dynamics of Remembrance: Texts between Monumentality and Morphing', in *Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, p 350.

and could then be known by others. Only when the novel is read can it be argued that some information of the past is transmitted to the readers.

Being sure that a piece of information conveyed by the novel is part of the collective memory of a community of memory would imply that that particular piece of information is actually known by people, not that it has simply been mediated and stored within a cultural product.⁹⁶ On this question Erll points out that fiction has only a 'potential' for memory-making:

This potential has to be *realized* in the process of reception: novels and movies must be read and viewed by a community *as* media of cultural memory. Films that are not watched or books that are not read may provide the most intriguing images of the past, yet they will not have any effect in memory cultures.⁹⁷

The mere existence of a cultural product does not demonstrate the actual state of the collective memory of a given community; it only shows that certain contents have been mediated into cultural items, are available to the public, and, thus, could be potentially known by the group members; however there is no proof that they actually are.

1.9 How to Study Literature in Relation to Collective Memory: Reception and Reiterations

⁹⁶ Fogu, Kansteiner, 'The Politics of Memory and Poetics of History', in *The Politics of Memory*, p. 287.

⁹⁷ Erll, 'Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory', in *Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, p. 395.

The gap between the existence of certain cultural artefacts and what people actually remember is one of the reasons that led several scholars to object to and criticise the notion of a text-based memory embodied by the term cultural memory.⁹⁸ Cultural historians Wulf Kansteiner and Claudio Fogu have stressed that studying memory through cultural objects:

Involves the challenge of relating the artefacts in question to their effects on producers and audiences. Collective memories might indeed be reflected in products of historical culture, but only if these products can be shown to have had similar effects, at the level of form and/or content, on the historical identities of their users.⁹⁹

To tackle the gap between cultural production and what people remember, Kansteiner advocates for the necessity of focusing on reception, rather than on the description of the cultural production.¹⁰⁰ A similar strategy has also been pursued by Rousso, who has considered book sales, film attendance figures, and opinion polls, all of which are forms of data that can help scholars understand how certain cultural products have been received in a given community of memory.¹⁰¹

Another aspect that scholars have considered important is the notion of canonicity. The study of the canon, indeed, helps highlight issues of reception, since texts that become canonical have gone through a

⁹⁸ For a series of criticism see J. Fabian, 'Remembering the Other: Knowledge and Recognition in the Exploration of Central Africa', *Critical Enquiry*, 26 (1999) 49-69 (p. 51); Radstone, 'Reconceiving Binaries', *History Workshop Journal*, pp. 134-150; Green, 'Can Memory be Collective?', in *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, pp. 96-97.

⁹⁹ Fogu, Kansteiner, 'The Politics of Memory', in *The Politics of Memory*, p. 287.

¹⁰⁰ Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in Memory', *History and Theory*, pp. 190-195.

¹⁰¹ Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, pp. 272-295.

successful process of critical reception within a given interpretative community. Moreover, as Rigney points out, the canon works as a 'stabilizer of remembrance', since the conceptualisations about the past that canonical texts convey tend to endure within society.¹⁰² In fact, canonical vectors of memory are subject to continuous readings and new interpretations and, therefore, are more likely to maintain an audience across generations.

Furthermore, the process of canon formation is tightly intertwined with the power structure of a given society, since it is through the actions of powerful carrier groups that certain texts become canonical.¹⁰³ Hence, the notion of canonicity appears extremely relevant for the study of the relationships between literature and collective memory, since it highlights those texts that have been positively received, have continued to circulate, have been interpreted over and over, and have obtained the support of structures of power.

This thesis, however, will only sparingly focus on reception and canonicity; instead, the study of the literature of the Axis War will be based on a tailored methodological approach which will offer a way to link together literary representations and collective memories. In order to develop such perspective it is necessary, firstly, to consider how memories are stabilised and reinforced in the brain.

¹⁰² Rigney, 'The Dynamics of Remembrance', in *Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, p. 350.

¹⁰³ On the relation between canon and power see B. Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 51. On the debate of the 1990s on the canon see J. Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

Since the work of Hermann Ebbinghaus in the late nineteenth century, which is seen as one of the first applications of the experimental method to the study of memory, it has been shown that through repetition memories can be strengthened.¹⁰⁴ The importance that repetitions have for the memory process has been confirmed by recent neurological investigations of the brain.

When a memory is retrieved the brain engenders a process that has been called 'reconsolidation': when reactivated, the specific neural pathway associated with a memory can be either stabilised, resulting in the strengthening of the memory, or, if new information is linked to it, it can be permanently modified.¹⁰⁵ The process of reconsolidation, on the one hand, shows that memories are alterable; on the other hand, though, it proves that repetition is one of the fundamental factors in the stabilization of individual memory, since the memories that are most likely to last and be remembered in the future are those that by being repeated, re-told, and re-lived have been reconsolidated.

Since individuals are the fundamental carriers of group memories, this fact has crucial implications for the study of collective memories as

¹⁰⁴ J. L. McGaugh, 'Emotional Activation, Neuromodulatory Systems, and Memory', in *Memory Distortions*, p. 255.

¹⁰⁵ B. Ecker, 'Memory Reconsolidation Understood and Misunderstood', *International Journal of Neuropsychotherapy*, 3.1 (2015), 2–46 (p. 6); C. M. Alberini, J. E. LeDoux, 'Memory Reconsolidation', *Current Biology*, 23.17 (2017), 746–750 (p. 747); Rose, 'Memories are Made of This', in *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, p. 207. The process of reconsolidation relates to what Alistair Thompson has called the 'memory paradox', since remembering something is both a way of stabilizing a memory in a particular form and, at the same time, an action that may permanently alter that memory. This paradox, though, is only apparent, since it is exactly because memories can be reconsolidated, i.e. modified through recollection, that retrieving can also result in the strengthening of a memory. See A. Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering', in *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, p. 90.

well. In fact, in a certain community of memory, within a particular memory discourse, certain memory narratives can acquire centrality only if they undergo processes of reconsolidation across society. As Anastasio and his colleagues have stressed, at the level of collective memory, too, 'repetition is paramount'.¹⁰⁶

ErlI has pointed out this aspect when arguing that what characterises memorable events is the fact that they are 'represented again and again, over decades and centuries, in different media: in newspaper articles, photography, diaries, historiography, novels, films, etc.'. ¹⁰⁷ She speaks therefore of the importance of the process of 'remediation', a term standing for the repeated mediations of a particular event through a range of different vectors and media.¹⁰⁸ It is only by being repeated by carrier groups and by being remediated by different vectors of memory that certain memory narratives can be foregrounded within a given memory discourse.

The recognition of the importance that processes of reiteration have in the stabilisation of memories at the collective level opens up routes for establishing connections between literary representations and collective memories. This thesis argues that by focusing on various forms of repetition in narrative texts it becomes possible to study literary

¹⁰⁶ Anastasio, Ehrenberger, Watson, Zhang, *Individual and Collective Memory Consolidation*, p. 152.

¹⁰⁷ ErlI, 'Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory', in *Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, p. 392.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 392. See also ErlI, *Memory in Culture*, p. 140. ErlI's conceptualisation is based on D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 1999).

objects as both memory-reflexive products and, at the same time, as memory-productive vectors.

Connections between processes of reiteration in literary texts and collective memory have been established in unsystematic ways by several scholars. Cesare Segre, for instance, has stressed the memory reflexive function of literary repetitions by arguing that the study of recurrent textual tropes puts scholars in front of images and ideas that belong to the collective memory of a given community.¹⁰⁹ In fact, a highly recurrent representation of a given event across numerous texts, rather than being an idiosyncratic depiction put forward by each one of the narratives, is likely to constitute a socially accepted way of representing that event. Hence, the identification of reiterated elements across a significant number of narrative texts can lead to the study of literary elements that reflect memory narratives that have circulated within a community.

At the same time, forms of repetition increase the memory productive potential of the literary vectors of memory. Erll has suggested this by arguing that repeated mediations across different media 'sustain the continuing impact of certain stories' which, thanks to their numerous occurrences, are more likely not only to be known, but also to be accepted and remembered by the public.¹¹⁰

This point was implicitly made when stressing the relevance that canonicity has for matters of collective memory. A work recognised as canonical is a text that is subject to several processes of reiteration, since

¹⁰⁹ C. Segre *Notizie dalla crisi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), p. 216.

¹¹⁰ Erll, *Memory in Culture*, p. 168.

it receives a constant attention within a given culture and is frequently republished, re-discussed, re-interpreted, and remediated.¹¹¹ It is thanks to these processes of repetition that canonical texts are more likely to be known and exercise an impact on the members of a given interpretative community.

Moreover, classical scholar Harald Weinrich has stressed that processes of repetition are also important in relation to the impact that a single vector of memory has on its readers. In fact, he argues that the branch of literary scholarship that is more equipped for the understanding of what people retain of books they have read — what he calls the ‘post-histoire’ of reading — is thematic criticism, which explores the formation of meaning in literary texts through figures of repetition.¹¹² As Sergio Zatti and Emanuela Annaloro have pointed out, this view implies that elements that are repeated within a text are also more likely to be transmitted to readers.¹¹³

Conclusion

At the end of this enquiry into theoretical conceptualisations of memory, processes of reiteration have been presented as the key elements for the

¹¹¹ Ibid., pp. 166-168. See also F. Kermode, *Forms of Attention* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

¹¹² H. Weinrich, 'Memoria letteraria e critica tematica', in U. M. Olivieri, ed., *Le immagini della critica: conversazioni di teoria letteraria* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003), p. 78.

¹¹³ S. Zatti, 'Sulla critica tematica: appunti, riflessioni, esempi', *Allegoria*, 52-53 (2006), 5-22 (p. 13); E. Annaloro, 'Problemi di critica tematica', *Allegoria*, 52-53 (2006), 171-184 (p. 172).

study of literature in relation to collective memory. In fact, the investigation of forms of repetition can both help locate those textual elements that are related to the memory narratives that circulated within a given community of memory and identify those textual contents that appear more likely to have had an impact on readers. In other words, forms of repetition in the cultural field can both reveal the memory-reflexive capacity of the cultural products and maximize the memory-making potential that a vector of memory theoretically has.

Therefore, in order to study the Italian literature of the Axis War in connection to the memory of World War II, this thesis will focus on various forms of repetition that characterise the literary production. These forms of reiterations will be seen both as an effect of the influence of the Italian memory discourse on cultural representations and, at the same time, as recurrent contents that were consistently conveyed to the readers by the literary vectors of memory and that, in this way, contributed to shaping the Italian memory discourse of World War II.

Chapter 2: Silence

'bontà sola ci resta,
tu persa in quella terra
di pietra, io in questa
silenziosa mia guerra'.¹

Introduction

In a study that aims to investigate the literary depiction of the Axis War and its relation to Italian collective memory, silence plays a fundamental role for several reasons. First of all, working on war narratives means dealing with one of those topics that scholars have considered as able to test the limits of what can be represented.²

In fact, being at war means surpassing the boundaries of what is perceived as normal and entering into a territory marked by excessiveness, which philosopher James Hillman has defined as the 'inhuman'.³ Hence, for people living in peacetime, understanding war appears difficult and complex, some claim even impossible.⁴ Parts of these

¹ G. Caproni, 'Così lontano l'azzurro', in *Cronistoria*, in Caproni, *L'opera in versi*, ed. by L. Zuliani (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), p. 87.

² E. Copley, *Representing War: Form and Ideology in the First World War* (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 6; A. Casadei, *Romanzi di Finisterre: narrazione della guerra e problemi del realismo* (Rome: Carocci, 2000), p. 17; K. McLoughlin, 'War and Words', in McLoughlin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 15-24. The debate on the limits of representation has been particularly paramount within Holocaust Studies, see S. Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1992).

³ J. Hillman, *A Terrible Love of War* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), p. 43.

⁴ James Campbell has defined as 'Combat Gnosticism' the 'belief that combat represents a qualitatively separate order of experience that is difficult if not impossible to communicate to any who have not undergone an identical experience', J. Campbell,

difficulties are of a linguistic nature, since everyday language does not seem able to express what individuals experience in combat. War, indeed, is a topic that defies attempts to narrate it: as literary critic Kate McLoughlin puts it, it 'resists depiction'.⁵

Yet, if silence appears as a constituent component of the war experience, this is not only due to the limits of what can be narrated and represented; sometimes, it is the experience itself that cannot be understood by the protagonists that go through it. Since the birth of the modern science of the human psyche, psychiatrists and psychologists have described the fractures that war opens in human minds. Great attention has been given to soldiers' inability to integrate war into their sense of being and time: 'shell shock', 'combat-stress', and 'post-traumatic stress disorder', are the clinical names that at different times have been given to the mental wounds — the traumas — that war inflict on those who take part in it.⁶

Caruth has defined trauma as a 'breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world' due to an event that was 'experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known'.⁷ Traumatic events cannot be processed by the mind, constituting experiences that people are not able to consciously process as explicit memories. By contrast, the trauma

'Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry', *New Literary History*, 30.1 (1999), 203-215 (p. 203).

⁵ McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 6.

⁶ M. A. Crocq, L. Crocq, 'From Shell Shock and War Neurosis to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A History of Psychotraumatology', *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, 2.1 (2000), 47-55.

⁷ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 4.

manifests itself through repetitions in an attempt to act out what has not been rationally comprehended.

Because of war's traumatic nature, in many cases silence appears as one of the few means available to express the traumatic core of the war phenomenon. Many writers have indeed resorted to it and composed war stories that are full of gaps, omissions, and implicit innuendos, which allow the description of war in an indirect way, according to a mode of writing that McLoughlin has called 'apophatic'.⁸

Awareness of the limits of representation, of the traumatic nature of warfare, and of the apophatic mode of war writing is crucial to bear in mind when dealing with war memories and their representations. However, these are not the only reasons why silence is such an important phenomenon for the analysis of the Italian memory of the Axis War and its literary depiction. The prominence of silence in relation to this particular topic is also due to a series of culturally and historically specific reasons, which cannot be explained simply by the difficulties that generally affect the writing of war narratives.

In fact the Axis War is an event of Italian history that has been placed at the margin of the national memory discourse of World War II. The Italian public memory has rarely touched upon it; historiographical studies have long neglected it; and cinematic and literary representations of this war had only a peripheral role within the field of Italian culture. As

⁸ McLoughlin, 'Not Writing about War', in *Fighting Words*, p. 54.

a result of this state of marginality a layer of silence has covered the Axis War, affecting the ways some literary texts have chosen to represent it.

The sections of this chapter focus on different levels on which silence appears to play a role both in the public memory of the Axis War and in its cultural depictions. Section One investigates the formation, in the post-war years, of the Italian memory discourse of World War II, following the reconstructions made by historians of the Italian collective memory.

Section Two constitutes a first exploration of processes of repetition, which will initially not be explored within texts, but in the field of Italian cultural production. Through the consideration of a wide range of literary vectors of memory of World War II this section will show that Italian literature had a pivotal role in marginalising the memory of the Axis War, while giving centrality to the Resistance and the Civil War.

Section Three develops a theoretical terminology for the study of silence in literary texts — what will be called the language of silence — which will be used in the textual analysis of the subsequent sections, and in other chapters of the thesis. Section Four considers the novels of the secondary corpus and shows that through a series of recurrent and consistent depictions these canonical texts have shrouded the Axis War with a layer of silence, contributing to the marginalisation of its memory. Section Five addresses four texts of the main corpus and shows that the silence that has surrounded the Axis War has also affected the way in which some narratives have dealt with it directly.

2.1 The Italian Collective Memories of World War II

At the end of the 1990s Mario Isnenghi, in the conclusion of the three volumes he edited on the *lieux de mémoire* of Italian collective memory, spoke about a major historical amnesia that had affected the memory of World War II.⁹ With this expression the historian referred to the fact that the Axis War, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, had achieved such a marginal position among the memory narratives of the war period that it almost seemed as if it had been forgotten.¹⁰ In order to understand how the memory of the Axis War was moulded and why it obtained such a marginal position, it is necessary to look at the more general phenomenon of the Italian collective memory of World War II.

In Italy the legacy of World War II has been particularly complex. The war was a disruptive experience that left the country in ruins and led to a revolution of the political system that reshaped the country's political identity. Italy entered into the war on the 10th of June 1940 as a Fascist country and as the main ally of Nazi Germany; it finished the war as a divided nation, shaken by a Civil War, and occupied by foreign armies.

For the first three years of the war the Italians had fought in several foreign countries, as part of the Axis Power. After the 8th of September 1943, with the surrender signed by the Badoglio's government

⁹ Nora defines the 'lieux de mémoire', or sites of memory, as 'any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community', Nora, 'Preface to the English Language Edition', in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, 2 vols (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1996), I, p. xvii.

¹⁰ M. Isnenghi, 'Conclusione', in Isnenghi, ed., *I Luoghi della memoria: strutture ed eventi dell'Italia Unita* (Rome; Bari: Laterza, 1997), p. 548.

and the subsequent change of alliance of the Italian Kingdom, the Italians ended up fighting in different camps: some at the side of the Allies, some as guerrilla fighters, others as supporters of the Italian Social Republic (RSI) — the Fascist state set in the north of the country that continued the war at the side of Germany. The diversity of the Italian experiences was well reflected by the fate of the POWs. Italian soldiers were imprisoned by all the main powers acting on the European fronts and, at the end of World War II, they were dispersed in prison camps all over the world: in Russia, in Germany, in America, as well as in India.¹¹

These diverse experiences generated numerous and varied memory narratives which began being negotiated by the Italian community of memory in the last years of the war. Historian Tony Judt has suggested that all around Europe the years 1943-1948 were not only the period of the creation of a new political order, but they were also, 'in an intimately related manner, the period during which Europe's postwar memory was moulded'.¹²

In Italy this stage was matched by a process of redefinition of the country's national and political identities. Although numerous examples can be employed to show that between democratic Italy and Fascist Italy a chain of continuity existed, the national political system went through a process of radical revolution, which Richard Bosworth and Patrizia

¹¹ On the Italian POWs see R. H. Rainero, *I prigionieri militari italiani durante la seconda guerra mondiale aspetti e problemi storici* (Milan: Marzorati, 1985).

¹² T. Judt, 'The Past is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe', in I. Deák, J. Gross, Judt, eds., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 296.

Dogliani have defined as a phase of 'reinvention of the state'.¹³ A political changeover occurred and Antifascist parties, which had opposed Fascism during the years of the regime and during the Italian Civil War, took over.

This change in the political structure of power had pivotal consequences for the way the Italian memory discourse of World War II was moulded. In fact, as a result of the political and cultural power they acquired, Antifascist movements became the main carrier groups of postwar Italy and their group memory became the centre of the Italian memory discourse of World War II.

These carrier groups did not identify with Fascism, a system they had opposed for many years and fought during the Civil War. Consequently, the memory narratives they moulded were based on a neat distinction between the new democratic order and the Fascist past and were centred, as in other European countries, on the war of Liberation against Nazism and Fascism.¹⁴

As a result, the Fascist regime was treated as an anomaly within the national history —a 'parenthesis' as Benedetto Croce famously defined it in a speech before the Allied authorities at the first congress of the National Liberation Committee in Bari — an interpretation that put

¹³ R. Bosworth, P. Dogliani, 'Introduction', in Bosworth, Dogliani, eds., *Italian Fascism: History, Memory and Representation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 3. On the continuity between Fascist Italy and the democratic state see C. Pavone, *Alle origini della repubblica: scritti su fascismo, antifascismo e continuità dello Stato* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995), pp. 123-159.

¹⁴ For a comparison of the collective memory narratives formed across various European countries see Lebow, Kansteiner, Fogu, eds., *The Politics of Memory*; Deaák, Gross, Judt, eds., *The Politics of Retribution*.

the stress on the differences between the postwar political order and Mussolini's dictatorship.¹⁵

The insistence on the discontinuity between democratic Italy and its Fascist past was also the result of a strategic defence of national interests pursued by the postwar Italian ruling class. Focardi has shown that the idea of the breach with Fascism favoured a precise political agenda, aiming to obtain a better peace-deal with the Allies. Antifascist parties saw in democratic Italy a renewed country that had participated in the defeat of Fascism and which therefore did not deserve an excessive punishment for the faults of the previous ruling class. Hence, they supported and emphasised the idea of the difference from the Fascist regime — which was already an element of the Allied war propaganda — as part of a strategy of negotiation with the victors.¹⁶

A similar strategic defence of national interests was also reflected in the way the postwar ruling class strove to protect those Italians whom other nations accused of having committed war crimes. Badoglio's government, the second government of Bonomi, and that of De Gasperi systematically protected all those men who had been accused by Greece, Yugoslavia, Ethiopia, Albania, France, and the Soviet Union.¹⁷ With the exclusion of those who were arrested abroad after the 8th of September

¹⁵ On Croce's theory of Fascism as parenthesis see the reflections of P.G. Zunino, *La Repubblica e il suo passato: il fascismo dopo il fascismo, il comunismo, la democrazia: le origini dell'Italia contemporanea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003), pp. 284-286.

¹⁶ Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*, pp. 3-4, 45-46.

¹⁷ Focardi, 'Criminali impuniti: cause e responsabilità della mancata Norimberga Italiana', in *Crimini di guerra*, pp. 133-158.

1943, and a few servicemen charged by the Allies with mistreatment of POWs, none of the Italians accused of war crimes was ever taken to trial.¹⁸

The uninvestigated Italian war crimes, as well as the extremely limited purges that expelled from the state apparatus men and women who had been involved with the Fascist dictatorship, can be seen as examples of the fact that in Italy the transition from dictatorship to democracy failed to assess politically and juridically the responsibilities that many Italians had for both Fascism and its wars.¹⁹

This avoidance of responsibility was not only the result of internal factors, but also due to the international scenario. Judt has pointed out that the European postwar order was built on the notion of German blameworthiness, an idea that facilitated the formation in other European nations of memory narratives that 'neglected certain tricky subjects' about their own culpability.²⁰ Furthermore, the beginning of the Cold War era strongly affected the Allies' agenda: in Italy, where the Communist party was particularly powerful, the country's stability, rather than a thorough reckoning of previous responsibilities, became the priority.²¹

The international relevance given to the question of German culpability, combined with the necessity of keeping Italy in a stable position, under the rule of conservative forces, resulted in the fact that an

¹⁸ Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*, pp. 150-151.

¹⁹ See M. Dondi, 'The Fascist Mentality After Fascism', in *Italian Fascism*, p. 143; Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), pp. 47-48; Ben-Ghiat, 'Liberation: The Italian Cinema and the Flight from the Past', in *Italy and America 1943-1944: Italian, American and Italian American Experiences of the Liberation of the Italian Mezzogiorno* (Naples: La Città del Sole, 1997), pp. 466-469.

²⁰ Judt, 'The Past is Another Country', in *The Politics of Retribution*, p. 296.

²¹ J. Sheehan, *The Monopoly of Violence: Why Europeans Hate Going to War* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), p. 156; Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy 1922-1945* (Berkeley CA.; London: University of California Press, 2001), p. 208.

'Italian Nuremberg' — an international trial that should have judged not only the misdeeds carried out on the Italian soil by both the RSI Fascists and the Germans, but also those committed by the Italian army during the Axis War — was never held.²² As a consequence of both national and international interests, a layer of silence descended on the Axis War and on the Italian war crimes committed abroad, which were quickly considered to be facts of the past that did not concern the new democratic country.

Despite the importance that the international scenario and the strategic interests of the Italian ruling class had in the development of this perspective on the past, it must be emphasised that this was also the result of the dynamics of power that moulded the Italian memory discourse. In fact, in the aftermath of World War II the narratives that obtained a dominant position within the Italian memory discourse were those based on the point of view of the Antifascist parties, which transmitted the idea that the Italians had overcome Fascism thanks to the war of liberation

This Antifascist perspective had a long lasting impact on the ways the Italians established a relationship with the Fascist past, since it structured the narrativisation of World War II as a collective semantic memory for future generations of citizens. As a result, through the decades a great part of the Italians continued to identify, or to be asked to

²² M. Battini, *The Missing Italian Nuremberg: Cultural Amnesia and Postwar Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 20-22; Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*, pp. 149-150; Oliva, *Le tre Italie del 1943; L'alibi della Resistenza: come abbiamo vinto la Seconda guerra mondiale* (Milan: Mondadori, 2005), pp. 126-127.

identify, with the opponents of the regime, rather than with its supporters, treating Fascism as a form of alterity that was expelled from the national community in the past and that they should continue to fight in the present.

Yet, even the memory of the Antifascist struggle had a contrasted legacy. In fact, since the Antifascist Resistance constituted the main source of legitimization of postwar political parties, its memory, while being presented as the centre of a renovated national identity, also became the object of a cultural battle.²³ Left-wing carrier groups, who had been the main actors of the Civil War, cherished it and conveyed it with strength, as the more the Italian political and cultural identity was bound to Antifascism and to the memory of the Resistance, the more Leftist movements appeared legitimately entitled to power.²⁴ By contrast, the Christian Democrats, despite not severing their links to the Resistance, downplayed its importance, in order to both diminish the source of legitimisation of the Left and gain the support of those Italians who had not identified with the Antifascist struggle.²⁵

Historians such as Focardi, Philip Cooke, and Giovanni De Luna, who have reconstructed the history of the public memory of the Italian Resistance until the 1990s, tend to agree, despite some differences in the

²³ R. Chiarini, *Alle origini di una strana Repubblica: perché la cultura politica è di sinistra e il paese è di destra* (Venice: Marsilio, 2013), p. 13.

²⁴ G. E. Rusconi, *Resistenza e Postfascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995), p. 33; Fogu, 'Italiani brava gente' in *The Politics of Memory*, p. 149.

²⁵ Rusconi, *Resistenza e Postfascismo*, p. 7.

periodisation, on the main traits of its development.²⁶ After the initial phase in which it obtained an absolute centrality in the political liturgies of democratic Italy, at the end of the 1940s the memory of the Resistance faded and began to lose importance, as an effect of Conservative carrier groups. At the end of the 1950s, though, after the celebration of the first decennial of the Liberation, its memory steadily gained relevance and in the 1960s, with the formation of centre-left governments, it received the support of institutional carrier groups, becoming what Stephen Gundle has called the 'civic religion' of the state.²⁷

The centrality that the Resistance obtained during the 1960s, though, did not end the memory battle. In fact, its memory remained the object of ongoing debates and polemics. As Dogliani points out at the end of the 1990s, in Italy the Resistance never became a shared source of national identity.²⁸ The significance that Italian citizens attributed to this part of their past and the ways they remembered it varied and changed according to their political identity — with Leftists being more favourable to it and Conservatives being more critical — but also according to their geographical belonging — with the Centre-North of the country being more concerned with its preservation than the South.²⁹

²⁶ Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*; P. Cooke, *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); G. De Luna, *La repubblica del dolore: le memorie di un'Italia divisa* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2011), pp. 41-48.

²⁷ Gundle 'The "Civic Religion" of the Resistance in Post- War Italy', *Modern Italy*, 5.2 (2000), 113-132 (p. 113).

²⁸ Dogliani, 'Constructing Memory and Anti-Memory: The Monumental Representation of Fascism and its Denial in Republican Italy', in *Italian Fascism*, p. 27.

²⁹ On the importance of geography in shaping Italian memories see Isnenghi, *Le guerre degli Italiani: parole, immagini, ricordi 1848-1945* (Milan: Mondadori, 1989; repr. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005), p. 261.

Moreover, a small part of the Italian population, which coincides with the political area represented by the Italian Social Movement (MSI) and by neo-Fascist movements, did not identify with the Antifascist side of the Civil War, but rather with the RSI Fascists. As a consequence of that, these people developed and carried memory narratives that were irreconcilable with the main discourse centred on the Resistance.³⁰

However, rather than the different positions that the Italians assumed before the Resistance, what appears particularly important for the present study is the fact that, through the decades, the numerous debates and the contrasting memory narratives about the Civil War kept this event at the centre of the national memory discourse. As Portelli has argued, Italy's main 'Historikerstreit', i.e. the historical debates affecting public opinion, have not involved so much Fascism or the national responsibility for colonialism, or for the Axis War, so much as the relationship between the country and the Resistance.³¹

Even in the 1970s, a period that in other European countries led to the reassessment of the idea of the country's responsibility when faced with its past, in Italy the major shift regarded the Civil War. In this period the vision of a unitary Resistance fighting mainly for nationalist interests, which was promoted by institutional carrier groups, was attacked by

³⁰ See F. Germinario, *L'altra memoria: l'estrema destra, Salò e la Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999), p. 8.

³¹ Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison; London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), pp. 127-128. Significant exceptions being the debate on the level of consensus achieved by the regime, fostered by the books and interviews of Renzo De Felice, and the public discussion on the use of illegal chemical weapons in the Italo-Ethiopian war, brought up by Angelo Del Boca. On the former see T. Baris, A. Gagliardi, 'The Controversies over Fascism during the 1970s and 1980s', *Studi storici*, 1 (2014), 317-334.

many youth movements of the Left, who saw in this narrative a way of taming the political and revolutionary implications that were part of the Resistance.³²

In the 1990s, too, with the collapse of the political system of the so called 'First Republic', the crisis of memory that this phase generated revolved around the legacy of the Resistance and its role in a country whose main parties had no direct ties to the actors of the Civil War.³³

Thanks to the numerous debates generated by competing and contrasting narratives, the Civil War always maintained a dominant position in the Italian memory discourse of World War II. By contrast, many other events of the war period, such as the deportation of the Italian Jews, the Allied violence during the occupation of Southern Italy, the killings of Fascist supporters at the end of the Civil War, and the murders of civilians by the Yugoslavian army on the Eastern border, long remained at the margin of the Italian memory discourse. Memory narratives of these events, though, did not disappear, but were kept alive by certain sub-groups within the Italian community of memory and, through the decades, they managed to acquire a renewed centrality in the national memory discourse.³⁴

³² Focardi, *Guerra della memoria*, pp. 47-50.

³³ See Focardi, 'Il passato conteso: Transizione politica e guerra della memoria in Italia dalla crisi della prima Repubblica ad oggi', in *L'Europa e le sue memorie*, pp. 51-90; De Luna, *La repubblica del dolore*, pp. 48-66.

³⁴ The evolution of the public memory of each one of these events has its own history. For an overview see Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*; on the evolution of the Italian public memory of the Holocaust see Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture*; on the most controversial aspect of the Civil War, which produced what Luisa Passerini calls 'areas of resistance to remembering', see L. Passerini, 'Memories of Resistance, Resistance of Memory', in *European Memories*, p. 290.

Some of the most marginalised memory narratives remained those related to the Axis War. From the very beginning this war appeared extremely difficult to remember, as it was a war of aggression fought and lost in faraway locations by a political system that had been overturned and from which democratic Italy wanted to be distanced. As a consequence of that, no prominent carrier group was willing to preserve and convey its memory.

A period that represented a partial exception was the early 1950s, a stage in which Christian Democrats tried to lessen the memory of the Resistance by conferring centrality on the sacrifice of the soldiers of the Axis War. Examples of this attempt are numerous, including Christian Democracy's propaganda in the 1948 general election, which gave strong emphasis to the memory of the Russian campaign;³⁵ the creation of the 'War Memorial of the Fallen Overseas' in Bari in 1953; and the visits to the 'Italian Military Memorial of El Alamein' of important politicians such as Giulio Andreotti in 1951 and Paolo Emilio Taviani in 1954.³⁶

These and other political actions — such as the short-lasting establishment of the 8th of May, Victory Day against Nazism, as a day of holiday — aimed to develop public narratives that could divert importance from the memory of the Resistance.³⁷ After this period,

³⁵ On the 1948 campaign see S. Cavazza, 'Comunicazione di massa e simbologia politica nelle campagne elettorali del secondo dopoguerra', in P. L. Ballini, M. Ridolfi, eds., *Storia delle campagne elettorali in Italia* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2002), pp. 204-214. See also A. Ventrone, 'Il nemico interno e le sue rappresentazioni nell'Italia del Novecento', in Ventrone, ed., *L'ossessione del nemico: memorie divise nella storia della Repubblica* (Rome: Donzelli, 2006), pp. 19-38.

³⁶ Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir*, pp. 189-197; See also P. Caccia Dominioni, *El Alamein: 1933-1962* (Milan: Longanesi, 1962), p. 408.

³⁷ Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir*, p. 144.

though, with the renewed centrality that the Resistance obtained around the end of the 1950s, the memory of the Axis War remained confined to a state of marginality, as a prerogative of the army and associations of veterans. These carrier groups, though, proved to be weak agents of memory in democratic Italy and, through the decades, they had only a more and more limited influence on the Italian national culture.³⁸

Rochat and Guri Schwarz have described the military discourse that was promoted by the military institutions. These carrier groups conveyed memory narratives that were self-indulgent and uncritical, based on a nationalist celebration of the resilience of the Italian soldiers; moreover these narratives were, borrowing Emilio Gentile's concept, completely 'de-fascistised', as they were deprived of any political implication or reference to Fascism.³⁹

This memory discourse foregrounded a few specific events, such as the retreat from the river Don in Russia and the second and third battles of El Alamein, fought from August to November 1942. Since these events, together with the Nazi massacre of Italian soldiers in the Greek island of Cephalonia, managed to acquire some relevance within the broader national discourse of World War II, Rochat has spoken of the memory of the Axis War as a 'memoria discontinua'.⁴⁰

³⁸ Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir*, p. 178; Rochat, *Le guerre italiane* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), p. xiv.

³⁹ Rochat, 'La guerra di Grecia', in *I luoghi della memoria: strutture ed eventi*, p. 348. On the process of de-fascistisation see E. Gentile, *Fascismo: storia e interpretazione* (Rome; Bari: Laterza, 2002), p. vii.

⁴⁰ Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. xiv. Similarly Gustavo Corni has talked about about a 'silenzio predominante [...] spezzato di quando in quando', Corni, *Raccontare la guerra*, p. 15. Rochat, however, has also stressed that, overall, the memory of the Axis War has achieved only a marginal position within the memory discourse of World War II, defining

Other aspects of the Axis War, though, remained shrouded by a thick layer of silence. Especially the history of the Italian occupations, the repression of the occupied populations, and the Italian war crimes have been significantly marginalised among these already marginal memory narratives, a fact that led Luigi Borgomaneri to call these events the 'grande rimosso' of the Italian collective memory.⁴¹

This brief overview of the Italian memories of World War II shows the polyphony and diversity of the memory narratives related to this event that have circulated within Italian society. Given this complexity and the long-lasting debates concerning the legacy of the Resistance, since the 1990s several scholars have put emphasis on the divisions that affected the Italian community of memory: Isnenghi spoke about a 'memoria frantumata'; Rusconi and Giovanni Contini about a 'memoria divisa'.⁴²

Since then the term 'divided memory' has stably entered into the debate on the Italian public memory. This expression was not simply used to highlight the fact that within the Italian community of memory different memory narratives coexisted, since this is always the case within any community of memory; rather, the term stressed the fact that for several decades divergent narratives on the Italian past survived with a high level of polarisation, without the delineation of an interpretation of

its memory as a 'memoria debole': Rochat, 'La guerra di Grecia', in *I luoghi della memoria: strutture ed eventi*, p. 347.

⁴¹ Borgomaneri, 'Introduzione', in *Crimini di guerra*, p. 11.

⁴² Isnenghi, *Le guerre degli italiani*, p. 253; Rusconi, *Resistenza e Postfascismo*, p. 7; Contini, *La Memoria Divisa*, pp. 170-171.

the past on which a great part of the members of the community seemed to agree.⁴³

Yet, despite the divisions within the national community of memory, it can now be seen that a series of similarities affected the ways in which the Italians have narrativised and remembered World War II. Beyond the centrality that has been given to the Civil War, the works of scholars such as Focardi, Ben-Ghiat, Schwarz, and Santarelli have begun to highlight that the diverse memory narratives that have divided and opposed the Italians along cultural, political, and geographical lines, have contributed, nonetheless, to negotiating common ways of remembering the past, forming what can now be seen as the Italian memory discourse of World War II.

In his seminal work, Focardi has highlighted the fact that the Italian memory of World War II has been largely affected by two stereotypes, positing the goodness of the Italians and the evilness of the Germans.⁴⁴ Ben-Ghiat, through many articles exploring various aspects of the Italian culture of the postwar years, has underscored the importance that the concepts of innocence and self-victimisation obtained in postwar Italy.⁴⁵ Schwarz has stressed that, together with the sense of victimisation, the other idea that has united the Italian memory narratives dealing with different moments World War II has been that of sacrifice.⁴⁶ Santarelli,

⁴³ Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, p. 10.

⁴⁴ Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*, p. x.

⁴⁵ Ben-Ghiat, 'Liberation', in *Italian Fascism*, p. 88; Ben-Ghiat, 'The Secret Histories of Roberto Benigni's Life is Beautiful', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14.1 (2001), 253-266 (p. 256).

⁴⁶ Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir*, pp. 143, 261, and 270.

instead, has drawn attention to the strategies of self-absolution that have informed the construction of narratives of the past in democratic Italy.⁴⁷

Throughout this thesis, and in particular in the conclusion of each chapter, the ideas put forward by these scholars will be further discussed and connected to those developed by other historians of the Italian memory of World War II. In fact, the analysis of the literary representation of the Axis War will give many opportunities to reflect on the conceptualisations that historians have identified as central components of the Italian memory of World War II. The study of these texts will, therefore, reveal the influence that this memory discourse had on the mediation of the Axis War in Italian literature and the role that the texts played in disseminating this discourse across society.

2.2 Silence among Cultural Vectors of Memory

In 2012 literary scholar Giancarlo Alfano argued that warfare had constituted an 'orizzonte permanente' of the Italian culture of the twentieth century.⁴⁸ It is not surprising, therefore, that through the decades World War II has often been the object of literary mediations. An overview of the numerous literary vectors of memory that have dealt with this event can help to corroborate an important aspect of the Italian

⁴⁷ L. Santarelli, 'Muted Violence: Italian War Crimes in Occupied Greece', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 9.3 (2004), 280-299 (p. 282).

⁴⁸ G. Alfano, *Ciò che ritorna: gli effetti della guerra nella letteratura italiana del Novecento* (Florence: Franco Cesati, 2014), pp. 70, 187.

memory discourse that was highlighted in the previous section, i.e. the centrality conferred on the Resistance and the Civil War.

In 1959 in the first issue of *Il Menabò di letteratura*, Raffaele Crovi, editing a bibliography of the literature of the Italian Resistance, was already able to list forty-two authors who had published literary accounts related to this subject.⁴⁹ In the following years the interest in the Civil War did not vanish and dozens of narrative books related to this topic, either from the point of view of the Antifascists or, in smaller numbers, from that of the RSI Fascists, continued to be published.⁵⁰

In a subsequent bibliographical survey, Manuela La Cauza has indicated that the fictional texts related to the Italian Civil War that were published by 1975 amounts to more than one hundred. Among these narratives, there are books of famous writers such as Elio Vittorini, Cesare Pavese, Italo Calvino, Beppe Fenoglio, Luigi Meneghello, Carlo Cassola, Vasco Pratolini, and Giorgio Bassani as well as those of minor figures such as Mario Tobino, Renata Viganò, Silvio Micheli, Romano Bilenchi, Giovanni Arpino, Davide Lajolo, Alberto Vigevani, and Saverio Tutino.⁵¹ Through a process of continuous mediation the texts written by all these authors

⁴⁹ R. Crovi, 'Bibliografia della letteratura italiana della seconda guerra mondiale', *Menabò di letteratura*, 1 (Turin: Einaudi, 1959), 252-257.

⁵⁰ On authors who wrote on the Civil War from the Fascist point of view see A. Briganti, 'La guerra, la prigionia, la Resistenza nella narrativa e nella poesia', in G. Mariani, M. Petrucciani, eds., *Letteratura italiana contemporanea* (Rome: Lucarini, 1982), p. 77.

⁵¹ As part of this production are also texts written by authors of the main corpus of this thesis, such as Corti, Rigoni Stern, Revelli, Cancogni, and Venturi, who have all dedicated some of their works to the Civil War: see M. La Cauza, 'La letteratura della seconda guerra mondiale e della Resistenza', in G. Luti, ed., *Il Novecento*, 2 vols (Padua: Piccin, 1989-1993), ii, pp. 1303-1305.

contributed to keeping the Civil War at the centre of the cultural discourse.⁵²

Yet the picture of the cultural vectors of memory that gave a steady attention to this part of Italian history can be further enlarged. In fact, Alberto Casadei has noted that a great majority of the texts of Italian literature do not focus directly on the Civil War, but rather tell stories that have their background in this event.⁵³ If one also takes into account these narratives the number of books dealing with the Italian Civil War rise almost immeasurably.⁵⁴

The centrality that the Resistance acquired in Italian culture is not only confirmed by the number of narrative vectors of memory, but also by the poetic works that have been published on it. In fact, the Civil War has represented an important source of inspiration and a fertile topic for many major Italian poets, such as Franco Fortini, Alfonso Gatto, Andrea Zanzotto, and Attilio Bertolucci, to name a few.

Furthermore, as literary scholar Anna Baldini stresses in her analysis of the formation and evolution of the literary canon of the Italian Resistance, before the 1980s non-fictional texts, such as articles, speeches, letters, diaries, and songs were considered as key parts of the Italian

⁵² Importantly, narrative texts on the Resistance continued to be published in the subsequent decades: see Casadei, *Romanzi di Finisterre*, p. 87; M. Carrattieri, 'Editoriale: la Resistenza tra memoria e storiografia', in *Passato e Presente*, 95 (2015), 5-18 (pp. 15-16).

⁵³ Casadei, *Romanzi di Finisterre*, p. 76.

⁵⁴ See for instance the list provided by Manuela La Cauza labelled 'Testimonianze narrative sul fronte interno — bombardamenti, occupazione alleata' in which she names more than fifty other novels set during the months of the Civil War: La Cauza, 'La letteratura della seconda guerra mondiale e della resistenza', in *Il Novecento*, pp. 1302-1303.

Resistance literature.⁵⁵ Among the vectors of memory of the Italian Resistance, therefore, it is important to count many memoirs written by intellectuals and politicians, such as those by Roberto Battaglia, Luigi Longo, Leo Valiani, Edgardo Sogno, Alfredo Pizzoni, Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, Ada Gobetti, and Dante Livio Bianco.⁵⁶ Among the non-fictional works, two particularly germane vectors of memory were the volumes of the last letters written by partisans and war prisoners who had been sentenced to death, edited by Piero Malvezzi and Giovanni Pirelli, which achieved great diffusion and editorial success.⁵⁷

Besides the number of books that were published, the importance of the vectors of memory related to the Italian Resistance is confirmed by matters of canonicity. Baldini, for instance, has discussed the works by Vittorini, Calvino, Pavese, Fenoglio and Meneghello as texts on the Resistance that achieved canonical status.⁵⁸ Furthermore, among the Italian authors who have written on World War II, Vittorini, Calvino, Pavese, and Fenoglio are the only ones who, together with Primo Levi and Elsa Morante, have been treated as canonical writers of Italian literature *tout court*.⁵⁹ Hence, if analysed from the perspective of canonical works, it can be stated that the Italian literature of World War II has been formed mainly of works devoted to the Civil War.

⁵⁵ A. Baldini, 'Il doppio canone della Resistenza', *900*, 13 (2005), 157-171 (pp. 158-160).

⁵⁶ See M. Saccenti, 'Resistenza, letteratura della' in V. Branca, *Dizionario critico della letteratura italiana* (Turin: Utet, 1974), p. 182.

⁵⁷ P. Malvezzi, G. Pirelli, *Lettere di condannati a morte della Resistenza italiana: 8 settembre 1943-25 aprile 1945* (Turin: Einaudi, 1952); P. Malvezzi, G. Pirelli, *Lettere di condannati a morte della Resistenza europea* (Turin: Einaudi, 1954).

⁵⁸ Baldini, 'Il doppio canone', *900*, p. 164.

⁵⁹ See for instance R. Antonelli, R. Ceserani, V. Coletti, C. Di Girolamo, G. Ferroni, R. Luperini, V. Spinazzola, M. Colsa, 'Riflessioni sul canone della letteratura italiana nella prospettiva dell'insegnamento all'estero', *Quaderns d'Italià*, 4-5 (1999-2000), 11-46.

Importantly, the centrality that the vectors of memory of the Resistance obtained in postwar Italy is confirmed by the critical reception that these works generated. To exemplify this point this thesis takes into account the publication of anthologies, a type of text that represents a particularly interesting case for issues of collective memory. In fact, not only do anthologies constitute a selection, and therefore a critical assessment, of what has been produced on a given subject by a certain time; but they also reproduce and remediate extracts from the selected works and, in this way, increase the possible readership of the anthologised texts, enhancing their function as vectors of memory.

In 1955, in an article published in *Tempo*, Enrico Falqui was still complaining about the absence of anthologies that could give visibility to the literature produced in the postwar years; hence he hailed positively the publication of two collected volumes of essays and non-fictional documents, which brought attention to the Italian Resistance.⁶⁰ However, with the tenth anniversary of the end of the war, what Falqui saw as a novelty became soon an extremely common type of publication in the field of Italian culture. In fact, over the next two decades, in the period

⁶⁰ E. Falqui, *Novecento letterario italiano: dizionaristi, bibliografi e antologisti* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1970) pp. 232-234, 235-236. The books discussed by Falqui are A. Battaglia, ed., *Dieci anni dopo: 1945-1955: saggi sulla vita democratica italiana* (Bari: Laterza, 1955); A. Garosci, ed., *Il secondo Risorgimento: nel decennale della Resistenza e del ritorno alla democrazia, 1945-1955* (Rome: Istituto poligrafico dello Stato, 1955). Prior to 1955 only one anthology presenting a selection of historical documents, extracts of memorials, and passages of fictional texts, had been published: L. M. Sturani, ed., *Antologia della Resistenza* (Turin: Centro del Libro Popolare, 1951).

1955-1975, more than eighteen anthologies related to the Italian Resistance were issued.⁶¹

This corpus of texts can be divided in three groups, according to the type of material that was remediated. The first consists of volumes that remediated only extracts from fictional and literary works, such as the anthologies on Resistance narrative edited by Ennio Bonea and Armida Marasco and by Delmo Maestri;⁶² those conceived for Italian schools edited by Rosathea Li Pera Pignato and by Alberto Abruzzese;⁶³ and those devoted to poetry edited by Filippo Accrocca and Valerio Volpini and by Ornella Bertero and Pietro Rachetto.⁶⁴

The second group is formed by anthologies that remediated only non-fictional materials. This group does not include volumes of essays on the Resistance, as those mentioned by Falqui, but anthologies of articles and speeches by the protagonists of the Antifascist war, such as that edited by Giampiero Carocci; anthologies of documents printed on partisan journals, such as that edited by Domenico Tarizzo; and anthologies of songs, such as those edited by Tito Romano and Giorgio Solza, by Cesare Bermani, and by Bonea.⁶⁵

⁶¹ This survey does not include all the anthologies published in the considered period, but only those that I managed to examine personally. A chronological list of all these texts is provided in the Appendix 1 at the end of the thesis.

⁶² E. Bonea, A. Marasco, eds., *Resistenza e letteratura* (Lecce: Editrice Adriatica, 1974); D. Maestri, ed., *Resistenza e impegno letterario* (Turin: Paravia, 1975).

⁶³ R. Li Pera Pignato, ed., *La Resistenza nella narrativa Italiana: antologia di letteratura contemporanea per le scuole medie superiori* (Brescia: Vannini, 1969); Abruzzese, Alberto, ed., *L'età dell'antifascismo e della Resistenza* (Florence: La Nuova Italia 1974).

⁶⁴ F. Accrocca, V. Volpini, eds., *Antologia poetica della Resistenza italiana* (S. Giovanni Valdarno: Landi, 1955); O. Bertero, P. Rachetto, eds., *Antologia poetica della resistenza* (Turin: Voci Nuove, 1965).

⁶⁵ G. Carocci, ed., *La Resistenza italiana* (Milan: Garzanti, 1963); D. Tarizzo, ed., *Come scriveva la resistenza* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1969); *Canti del primo e del secondo Risorgimento*, ed. by consiglio federativo giovanile della Resistenza (Venice: Tip.

Finally, the third group is formed by those volumes that presented both fictional and non-fictional materials. This constituted, numerically, the most significant type of anthologies on the Italian Resistance, with at least seven titles published in the period 1955-1975, edited by scholars such as Aristide Marchetti, Guido Tassinari, Maurizio Milan, Fausto Vighi, Luciano Pasqualini, Mario Saccenti, Antonio Repaci, Carlenrico Navone, Roberto Battaglia, Raffaello Ramat, Giorgio Luti, and Sergio Romagnoli.⁶⁶

These publications, which covered a wide range of cultural forms, can be seen as a sign of the thorough process of critical reception that invested the cultural production on the Italian Resistance. Moreover, they constitute proof of the active efforts that many scholars made to convey this production to the Italian audience. In other words, all these anthologies offer a clear embodiment of the constant attention that Italian scholars have paid to the Resistance since the year of the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Liberation.⁶⁷

All the vectors of memory considered up to this point participated in the diffusion of memory narratives related to the Italian Civil War. The

Commerciale, 1961); T. Romano and G. Solza, *Canti della Resistenza italiana* (Milan: Avanti!, 1960); C. Bermani, ed., *Canti della Resistenza armata in Italia* (Milan: Edizioni del Gallo, 1972); Bermani, ed., *Canti della Resistenza armata in Italia*, repr. edn (Milan: Edizioni Bella Ciao, 1974); Bonea, ed., *La letteratura partigiana: stampa clandestina e canti* (Lecce: Adriatica Editrice Salentina, 1975).

⁶⁶ A. Marchetti, G. Tassinari, eds., *La Resistenza nella letteratura: antologia* (Milan: Associazione Partigiani A. Di Dio, 1955); M. Milan, F. Vighi, eds., *La resistenza al Fascismo: scritti e testimonianze* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1955); L. Pasqualini, M. Saccenti, eds., *Due Risorgimenti: pagine di storia italiana: 1796-1947* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1961); A. Repaci, C. Navone, eds., *Dio e popolo: antologia del Risorgimento e della Resistenza* (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1961); R. Battaglia, R. Ramat, eds., *Un popolo in lotta: testimonianze di vita italiana dall'Unità al 1946* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1961); G. Luti, S. Romagnoli, eds., *L'Italia partigiana* (Milan: Longanesi, 1975); A. Marchetti, G. Tassinari, eds., *La Resistenza nella letteratura: antologia*, repr. edn (Rome: EBE, 1975).

⁶⁷ Significantly, anthologies on the Italian Resistance have continued to be published, though with less frequency, until recent times. At least fifteen texts of this kind have been published in the decades following 1975. See the Appendix 1.

number of texts published, the ethical importance that they played for democratic Italy, the aesthetic values of several of them, and the critical reception they generated maintained the Civil War at the centre of Italy's cultural production and contributed to giving attention to the memory of the Resistance.

By contrast, if one addresses the cultural vectors of memory that have conveyed a representation of the Axis War, the picture drastically changes. At first glance this difference does not appear too striking, given the number of texts also published on this subject. Rochat calculated that between 1945 and 2005 more than two hundred books on the Russian and Greek campaigns were published.⁶⁸ Interestingly, these publications present major imbalances: while diaries and war memoirs on the Russian campaign amount to almost two hundreds, Rochat is able to indicate only fifteen texts devoted to the Greek campaign, a fact that confirms Rochat's thesis of the discontinuity of the public memory of the Axis War.⁶⁹

These texts, however, represented less effective vectors of memory compared to those related to the Civil War. In fact, the majority of them

⁶⁸ The number of memoirs on the Russian and Greek campaigns are taken respectively from, Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. 397; Rochat, 'La guerra di Grecia', in *I luoghi della memoria: strutture ed eventi*, p. 351.

Besides these texts Lucio Ceva has counted about fifteen memoirs related to the African campaign, Ceva, *Africa Settentrionale*, p. 264.

⁶⁹ It is key to point out that this difference does not reflect the factual involvement of the Italian army: only 230,000 soldiers were sent to the Russian front, while more than 500,000 men fought in Greece. For the number of troops deployed in Russia and Greece see Corni 'Italy after 1945: War and Peace, Defeat and Liberation', in L. Kettenacker, T. Riotte, eds., *The Legacies of Two World Wars: European Societies in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Berghahn, 2011), p. 258; Rochat, 'La guerra di Grecia', in *I luoghi della memoria: strutture ed eventi*, p. 350. For possible explanations of the reasons why in postwar Italy the memory of the Russian campaign received more attention than other segments of the Axis War see Isnenghi, *Le guerre degli italiani*, p. 254; Chiarini, *Alle origini di una strana Repubblica*, p. 225.

are war memoirs written by mostly unknown soldiers and published by small publishing houses, which, therefore, found a limited readership.⁷⁰

Moreover, in the case of texts issued by more significant publishers, such as those that form the main corpus of this thesis, their weak influence on Italian culture is proven by the negligible reception they generated. In fact, Italian literary scholars have largely neglected the literature of the Axis War. Although articles and monographs that deal with the most known authors of the main corpus exist, with Malaparte, Rigoni Stern, and Morante being the most studied, during the twentieth century no significant study has addressed these war narratives as a unitary phenomenon.

Before the end of the twentieth century the main critics who have dealt with the theme of warfare have been Mario Isnenghi and Alberto Casadei: however, neither of them has addressed the literary representation of the Axis War in depth.⁷¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that the first international collected volumes that, in the 1980s, began to focus on the Western literature of World War II in a transnational and comparative perspective did not address the Italian case at all.⁷²

As a result, specific studies on the narratives of the Axis War have appeared only within works of history of Italian literature; or they have

⁷⁰ Corni, *Raccontare la guerra*, p. 22.

⁷¹ Isnenghi has focused in particular on the literature of the Great War; Casadei, despite having addressed the literature of World War II, has done so only in reference either to foreign authors or to the Italian Resistance: see Isnenghi, *Il mito della grande Guerra: da Marinetti a Malaparte* (Bari: Laterza, 1970); Isnenghi, 'Letteratura della seconda guerra', in *Le guerre degli italiani*, pp. 250-266; Casadei, *La guerra* (Rome: Laterza, 1999); Casadei, *Romanzi di Finisterre*.

⁷² H. Klein, J. Flower, E. Homberger, eds., *The Second World War in Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984); I. Higgins, ed., *The Second World War in Literature* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic, 1986).

been written by historians who, however, have focused on the memoirs of specific campaigns, rather than on fictional production, without employing theories and methodologies that characterise literary analysis.⁷³

This lack of critical attention is embodied in the small number of anthologies in which texts of the Axis War literature have been remediated. There are no volumes that deal specifically with the Axis War. Extracts by Rigoni Stern, Cecovini, and Malaparte can, however, be found in two anthologies that deal with the general phenomenon of warfare beyond the perimeter of Italian literature, such as *Scrittori in guerra*, edited by Piero Pieroni in 1959, and *La guerra della Naja Alpina*, edited by Rigoni Stern in 1967 — which, significantly, were not edited by scholars, but by two writers.⁷⁴

Yet extracts of the Axis War literature have also appeared in two anthologies of the Italian Resistance, those edited in 1961 by Battaglia and Ramat, and by Pasqualini and Saccenti. These texts reconstruct Italian national history through a selection of documents and cultural products

⁷³ See G. Manacorda, 'Narrativa e memorialistica di guerra', in Manacorda, ed., *Storia della Letteratura italiana contemporanea* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1977), pp. 295-308; Briganti, 'La guerra', in *Letteratura italiana contemporanea*, pp. 53-94. Rochat, 'Memorialistica e storiografia sulla campagna italiana di Russia 1941-1943', in Collotti, ed., *Gli italiani sul fronte russo* (Bari: De Donato, 1982); See also Ceva, *Africa Settentrionale*.

⁷⁴ P. Pieroni, ed., *Uomini in guerra: racconti di guerra* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1959); M. Rigoni Stern, ed., *La guerra della naja alpina* (Milan: Ferro, 1967). By contrast, in the anthology *Guerra e Letteratura*, edited by Alfonso Berardinelli in 1976, no author of the main corpus appears, and the part on World War II is devoted either to foreign writers or to texts related to the Italian Resistance: A. Berardinelli, ed., *Guerra e letteratura* (Milan: Edizioni del Sole, 1976). An interesting and significant exception is represented by an anthology of Italian war poetry, edited in 1965 by Renzo Laurano e Gaetano Salvetti, in which an entire section is devoted to the Italian poetry of the Axis War, R. Laurano, G. Salvetti, *Le cinque guerre: poesie e canti italiani* (Milan: Nuova Accademia, 1965), pp. 267-366.

that span from the war of unification to the creation of the Italian Republic, creating a link between the Resistance and the wars of unification, according to the paradigm of the 'Secondo Risorgimento'.⁷⁵ As a result of this structure, these volumes also anthologise some authors of the main corpus, even if in an extremely limited space.⁷⁶ These two anthologies testify to the state of marginality of the Axis War in Italian literary scholarship of the postwar years, which addressed this event only as a minor episode within a discourse centred on the Resistance.

In 2008 literary critic Umberto Rossi argued that this critical gap, rather than being limited to the Axis War, has concerned the wider phenomenon of war literature, which he considered to be a generally overlooked subject of enquiry in Italian scholarship.⁷⁷ In the last decade or so, though, this situation has started to change and several Italian scholars have begun to address the cultural representation of warfare with renewed interest.⁷⁸ In relation to World War II, besides works on the general issue of war literature, such as those by Alfano and Rossi, it has been especially the literature produced by the Italian Alpine soldiers, which has its core in the texts on the retreat from the Soviet Union, that

⁷⁵ On the idea of the Resistance as a 'Secondo Risorgimento' see Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*, p. 7; Pavone, *Alle origini della repubblica*, p. 3.

⁷⁶ In particular, among the almost four hundred pages of the volume edited by Battaglia and Ramat, about twenty-five pages concern the Axis War, presenting an extract from Rigoni Stern. Similarly, in the anthology by Pasqualini and Saccenti, a volume of more than one thousand pages, the Axis War is addressed in less than forty pages, presenting extracts by Rigoni, Cecovini, and other writers of memorials. See; Battaglia, Ramat, eds., *Un popolo in lotta*, pp. 254-278; Pasqualini, Saccenti, eds., *Due Risorgimenti*, pp. 586-622.

⁷⁷ U. Rossi, *Il secolo di fuoco: introduzione alla letteratura di guerra del Novecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2008), p. 62.

⁷⁸ This has been favored by studies on World War I which flourished in particular around the time of the one hundred years anniversary: see F. Senardi, ed., *Scrittori in trincea: la letteratura e la Grande guerra* (Rome: Carocci, 2008); S. Cirillo, ed., *La Grande guerra nella letteratura e nelle arti* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2016); A. Delogu, A. M. Morace, eds., *Scrittura e memoria della Grande guerra* (Pisa: ETS, 2016).

has attracted the attention of scholars, with works by Marco Mondini, Gianluca Cinelli, and Gustavo Corni.⁷⁹

Prior to these recent works, Italian scholarship largely neglected the literature of the Axis War, engendering a limited critical reception that hampered the circulation of these war narratives across Italian society, weakening their function as vectors of memory. This fact, though, does not mean that the texts of the main corpus did not find any sort of readership. By contrast, the narrow critical reception is at odds with the commercial success that several of these books had among the Italian interpretative community.

For instance, Rigoni Stern's *Il Sergente nella neve* and Biasion's *Sagapò* were the first and third best-selling books of their publishing series, i.e. Einaudi's 'I Gettoni' edited by Vittorini.⁸⁰ Bedeschi's *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio* and Luigi Preti's *Giovinezza, Giovinezza* won the Bancarella prize, which is given by booksellers to one of the main editorial

⁷⁹ See M. Ardizzone, ed., *Scrittori in divisa: memoria epica e valori umani: atti del Convegno in occasione della 73. adunata dell'Associazione nazionale alpini* (Brescia: Grafo 2000); M. Mondini, *Alpini: parole e immagini di un mito guerriero* (Rome, Laterza, 2008); G. Cinelli, *Ermeneutica e scrittura autobiografica: Primo Levi, Nuto Revelli, Rosetta Loy, Mario Rigoni Stern* (Milan: Unicopli, 2008); Corni, *Raccontare la guerra*; Cinelli, *'Viandante, giungessi a Sparta...': Il modo memorialistico nella narrativa contemporanea* (Rome: Sapienza Università Editrice, 2016). Mondini has also written several articles that address the literature of the Axis War in relation to the conceptualisation of warfare that this body of texts puts forward: see Mondini, 'Narrated Wars: Literary and Iconographic Stereotypes in Historical Accounts of Armed Conflict', in Mondini, M. Rospoher, eds., *Narrating War: Early Modern and Contemporary Perspectives* (Bologna: Il Mulino; Berlin: Ducker & Humblot, 2013), pp. 11-28; Mondini, 'Manly Heroes and Innocent Victims: Italian Representations of Warfare after Defeat 1945-1961', in P. Tame, D. Jeannerod, M. Bragança, eds., *Mnemosyne and Mars: Artistic and Cultural Representations of Twentieth-Century Europe at War* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 99-119.

⁸⁰ Cavalli, 'L'amore al tempo della guerra di Grecia', in *Libri e scrittori di via Biancamano: casi editoriali in 75 anni di Einaudi* (Milan: EduCatt, 2009), p. 253.

success of the year.⁸¹ Moreover, the major novels by Rigoni Stern and Bedeschi were both bestsellers in their time and still popular in the following years and, in terms of copies sold, they are two of the most successful Italian narrative books of the twentieth century.⁸² The success of these texts proves the interest that Italian readers had in this part of the country's past, which was generally folded in silence and neglected in the national memory discourse.

The importance that these books had in conveying a representation of the Axis War to the Italian interpretative community was strengthened by the fact that among other types of vectors of memory the Axis War appears even more marginalised than in the literary field.⁸³ In the conclusion of this section it is useful to briefly consider cinematic production. Although the examination of Italian films sits outside the remit of this thesis, this sector is worth mentioning, not only because some of the authors that form the main corpus worked in the cinema industry and, at times, were involved in projects related to the Axis War, but especially because in this field the silence that surrounded the Axis campaigns appears particularly thick.

⁸¹ Another book on the Axis War, Paolo Caccia Dominioni's *El Alamein*, also won the Bancarella prize. See M. Bruschi, 'Premi Letterari', in N. Borsellino, L. Felici, eds., *Storia della Letteratura italiana. Il novecento: scenari di fine secolo* (Florence: Garzanti, 2001), p. 913.

⁸² Through the decades Rigoni's book sold around 700,000 copies in 75 editions; Bedeschi's novel had more than 100 editions and sold more than 3,000,000 copies. These figures are respectively taken from Corni, *Raccontare la guerra*, p. 24; Mondini, *Alpini*, p. 197.

⁸³ Significantly, the Axis War has also been an extremely neglected topic among historical studies. On this see Rochat, 'Gli studi storico militari', in Isnenghi, ed., *Gli italiani in guerra: conflitti, identità, memorie dal Risorgimento ai nostri giorni*, 5 vols (Turin: Utet, 2008), v, pp. 607-608.

Gianfranco Casadio in his work on the representation of war in Italian cinema has listed one hundred and nineteen films devoted to military operations of World War II produced by the end of the twentieth century.⁸⁴ Among them, though, only twenty-six relate to the Italian experience in the Axis War: in particular, the campaigns in Greece, Yugoslavia, and Russia have been mediated by an extremely limited number of films — less than ten in total — while the majority of movies portraying the Italian participation in World War II have dealt with the African campaign and, in continuity with Fascist war films of propaganda, with naval battles in the Mediterranean Sea.⁸⁵

More than half of the films indicated by Casadio were shot during the 1950s, a period in which the Axis War was a fashionable topic in Italian cinema. The movies released in this period, such as, for instance, *I sette dell'orsa maggiore*, *Carica eroica*, *I siluri umani*, *La pattuglia dell'Amba-Alagi*, and *Divisione Folgore*, present several connections to the military and conservative memory narratives created in the aftermath of the war. In fact, these films, which Giampiero Brunetta has defined as 'un filone nazionalista e patriottico', unfold in a sort of timeless dimension and imprecise context, focus on traditional war values, such as the ideas

⁸⁴ G. Casadio, *La guerra al cinema: i film di guerra nel cinema italiano dal 1944 al 1996*, 2 vols (Ravenna: Longo 1997-1998), II, p. 7.

⁸⁵ Casadio offers an inventory of the movies produced on the Axis War, ordered by war theatre, with a synopsis and a short critical comment, see *ibid.*, pp. 7-95. A list of movies of the Axis War, with full references, is provided in the Appendix 2 at the end of the thesis.

of heroism, sacrifice, and glory, and are deprived of any reference to Fascism.⁸⁶

Following this phase, in the subsequent fifty years the Axis War remained largely excluded from cinematic mediation and no major Italian film dealt with it.⁸⁷ Yet, rather than the limited number of films released, what makes the reference to silence particularly relevant in discussing the Italian film industry is the number of movies on the Axis War that had been planned, but were never produced.

A particularly notable case was that of 'L'armata s'agapò', a film proposal written by film-critic Renzo Renzi, and published in February 1953 as a loose basic script in the journal 'Cinema Nuovo'. The script, which Renzi rightly foresaw as being controversial, focused on the Italian occupation of Greece and aimed to offer a depiction of the war years that could differ from that developed by the films of the time.⁸⁸ A retired general found the screenplay offensive towards the Italian army and sued Renzi and Guido Aristarco, the editor of the journal, at a military tribunal.

⁸⁶ G. P. Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano: dal neorealismo al miracolo economico 1945-1959* (Rome: Riuniti 1993), pp. 565-566. See also Corni, *Raccontare la guerra*, p. 17; L. Ellena, 'Guerre fasciste e memoria pubblica nel cinema del dopoguerra', in *Crimini di guerra*, pp. 185-186; Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppelir*, p. 190.

⁸⁷ Casadio lists twelve war movies released in the period 1960-1996: two set in Greece, *Le soldatesse* (1965) and *Crepuscolo di Fuoco* (1970); two set in Yugoslavia, *Una sporca guerra* (1964) and *La battaglia della Neretva* (1969); one set in Russia, *Italiani brava gente* (1964); five set in North Africa, *Pastasciutta nel deserto* (1961), *Quattro notti con Alba* (1961), *La battaglia di El Alamein* (1968), *Commandos* (1968), *Scemo di guerra* (1985); two about naval battles in the Mediterranean sea, *L'affondamento della Valiant* (1961), *Finchè dura la tempesta* (1963), Casadio, *La guerra al cinema*, II, pp. 7-95. The Axis War has also offered the background to ten comedy movies: *Come persi la guerra* (1947), *Anni difficili* (1948), *I peggiori anni della nostra vita* (1949), *Pezzo capopezzo e capitano* (1958), *Tutti a casa* (1960), *I due nemici* (1961), *I due colonnelli* (1962), *Vino whisky e acqua salata* (1963), *Io non scappo fuggo* (1970), *Mediterraneo* (1991), Casadio, *La guerra al cinema*, I, pp. 193-243. For full references see the Appendix 2, which also counts three films not addressed by Casadio.

⁸⁸ R. Renzi, 'L'armata s'agapò', *Cinema nuovo* 4 (1953), now in P. Calamandrei, Renzi, G. Aristarco, eds., *Dall'Arcadia a Peschiera: Il processo s'agapò* (Bari: Laterza, 1954), p. 36.

The two were both arrested, spent a period in prison, and received a light sentence in the following September.⁸⁹

After the great uproar that this event caused in the press, many screenwriters, and directors became interested in making a film on the Italian occupation of Greece. However, almost all the projects eventually failed to be produced. For instance, Biasion's *Sagapò* film rights were bought three times, once by Anna Magnani for a project that had Roberto Rossellini as film-director; however, a movie based on the book was never made.⁹⁰

Another project that failed was the screen adaptation of Comisso's *Una donna al giorno*, a short novel on the adventures of an Italian soldier who, after the 8th of September 1943, travels from Greece to Italy and manages to survive thanks to the favour he receives from the many women who choose him as their lover.⁹¹

Similarly, Pirro did not manage to produce a movie from *L'armata dell'amore*, a screenplay he had written on the Italian occupation of Greece, and to adapt his novels *Le Soldatesse* and *Jovanka e le altre* into a film.⁹² Ermanno Olmi's adaptation of *Il sergente nella neve*, too, was never

⁸⁹ On the 's'agapò affair' and the reactions it generated in the newspapers see Calamandrei, Renzi, Aristarco, *Dall'Arcadia a Peschiera*, pp. 40-98; Brunetta, 'Il processo "S'agapò"', in *Gli italiani in guerra*, IV, pp. 829-846.

⁹⁰ T. Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), pp. 554-555.

⁹¹ G. Comisso, *Una donna al giorno* (Milan: Longanesi, 1949).

⁹² A movie based on *Le soldatesse* was eventually produced ten years later, under the direction of Valerio Zurlini, but only after Pirro was excluded from screenwriting. The adaptation of *Jovanka e le altre* is an extremely telling case: the film was actually made in 1960, thanks to an international production directed by Martin Ritt; however the set of the story was completely changed, since the Italian occupiers disappeared and were replaced by the Germans. See Pirro, *Soltanto un nome nei titoli di testa: i felici anni Sessanta del cinema italiano* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998), p. 63; Pirro, *Il cinema della nostra vita* (Milan: Lindau, 2001), pp. 21-22.

produced, despite the fact that the film director remained interested in the script he had written together with Rigoni Stern for more than ten years.⁹³

Economic reasons and the controversies that stories focusing on the sexual intercourse of soldiers could have raised help explain the failure of these projects.⁹⁴ However, both Pirro and Olmi claimed that these never-shot movies lacked the political protection that would have been necessary to produce a film on a vexed issue such as the Axis War, if not in the nationalist and uncritical forms developed in the early 1950s.⁹⁵

This brief excursus in cinematic mediations shows that the Axis War has been extremely marginalised in Italian cinema. As a result, novels and short stories have constituted the main vectors of memory available to the Italian public. These texts, therefore, played an important role in conveying to the Italian community representations of a part of the national past that in both the memory discourse and in the cultural field was preponderantly surrounded by silence.

⁹³ Brunetta, 'Il sergente di Olmi e Rigoni Stern disperso negli anni del disgelo', in E. Olmi, Rigoni Stern, *Il sergente nella neve: la sceneggiatura* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), pp. 212-213.

⁹⁴ Precautionary censorship was normally exercised by Italian producers, who stopped movie projects that were in danger of not getting permission from the censorship commission, which was in place until 1962, Brunetta, *Storia del cinema Italiano*, III, pp. 95-96. See also G. Bonsaver, 'Censorship from the Fascist period to the Present', in P. Bondella, ed., *The Italian Cinema Book* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), p. 69.

⁹⁵ Pirro, *Soltanto un nome*, pp. 62-67; Brunetta, 'Il sergente di Olmi', in *Il sergente nella neve: la sceneggiatura*, p. 215.

2.3 The Language of Silence

With the expression 'language of silence' this thesis refers to the literary techniques through which silence can be interwoven in the narrative discourse of a text.⁹⁶ Silent elements are constituent components of any narrative, since what is represented and narrated constitutes only a portion of what takes place in a fictional storyworld.⁹⁷ As literary theorist Lubomír Doležel argues, the diegetic world of any narrative is bound to be 'incomplete'.⁹⁸

In order to make representation possible, the narrative material must undergo a process of selection and several elements must remain unrepresented. In Narratology the omissions, or lacunae, intentionally or unintentionally created, are referred to as 'gaps', which Porter Abbott defines as the 'inevitable voids, large or small, in any narrative that the reader is called upon to fill'.⁹⁹

Two kinds of gaps can be distinguished. A first type of lacuna refers to the textual domain of the implicit.¹⁰⁰ A gap may arise in the narrative discourse, but the text itself provides elements that can guide readers in filling in the omission. Clues, hints, innuendos, and other contextual elements help readers interpret the lacuna and guide them to

⁹⁶ On the difference between the concepts of narrative, narrative discourse, and narration see H. P. Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 237-238.

⁹⁷ W. Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 280.

⁹⁸ L. Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 169.

⁹⁹ Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, p. 234.

¹⁰⁰ Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, pp. 171-177.

understand what is not openly stated nor directly shown through representation.¹⁰¹

There is, however, another type of gap, whose presence can still be noticed, but whose content cannot be filled in with accuracy. This form of irrecoverable gap is what Abbott calls a 'permanent gap' and Doležel defines as a textual passage of 'zero-texture'.¹⁰² In this case the lacuna is absolute and the text does not provide any clues that can help readers fill in the omission.¹⁰³

Yet, it is important to note that the lack of any textual anchor does not stop the interpretational process, as readers can still speculate about the events that take place in a permanent gap.¹⁰⁴ However, this kind of speculation can only remain conjectural, since the text offers no clues that could back up a particular interpretation. As Abbott points out, the interpretation of a permanent gap can only rely on readers' experience, knowledge, and imagination.¹⁰⁵

On the legitimacy of filling in permanent gaps by resorting to extra-textual information, the scholarship is actually divided. For instance, Segre recognises this possibility, arguing that scholars should interpret permanent gaps on the basis of historical data and information

¹⁰¹ Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, p. 90.

¹⁰² Abbott, 'How do We Read What isn't There to be Read?: Shadow Stories and Permanent Gaps', in L. Zunshine, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 107; Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, p. 182.

¹⁰³ As an example of this type of gap Genette talks about the days that follow the death of Marcel's grandmother in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*: nothing is said about this time, even retrospectively; this moment is completely excluded from representation and becomes 'le silence le plus opaque de tout la *Recherche*', G. Genette, 'Discours du récit: essai du méthode', in *Figures III* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), p. 141.

¹⁰⁴ Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, pp. 175-177.

¹⁰⁵ Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, p. 234.

provided by the author.¹⁰⁶ Doležel, by contrast, considers permanent gaps in fictions as a type of lacuna that can never be filled in, since only the text could provide hints for doing so, while it does not.¹⁰⁷ He notes, though, that the permanent gaps in other types of narratives, such as historiographical accounts, can be filled in by further studies, which are able to show what has been previously silenced.¹⁰⁸

The latter point is particularly important for the subject of the present research. The hybrid nature of the texts studied by this thesis offers an advantage in dealing with the permanent gaps in these narratives. The texts of the two corpora are fictional accounts that nevertheless maintain a strong referential point in the historical events of World War II. Even if one follows Doležel's restrictive view that permanent gaps in fiction cannot be filled in, historiography can help us pinpoint the existence of these gaps and identify what has been excluded from representation.

Another important distinction in the study of literary gaps relates to the type of silence that these lacunae generate. It is possible to speak about two types of silence. The first one, which can be called 'transitive silence', is a silence that does not prevent the communication of a message to the readers. Abbott underlines that sometimes in the art of telling 'less can be more' and it is through the silencing of some parts of the story that a particular idea can obtain prominence.¹⁰⁹ Similarly,

¹⁰⁶ Segre, *Notizie dalla crisi*, pp. 15-17.

¹⁰⁷ See Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, p. 156.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Nicoletta Simborowski has emphasised that in many cases literary texts convey information elliptically and implicitly by relying on the use of silence.¹¹⁰ Transitive silence is generally the result of implicit portions of the text, since, as Simborowski points out, information that is silenced in this way is nonetheless able to emerge thanks to other textual hints.¹¹¹

Transitive silence has been the object of study of several literary scholars. For instance, Simon Sibelman, who has explored the role of silence in the works of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, has argued that even if the author chooses to keep the most hideous facts out of representation, the ways in which he does so manage to convey the sense of the enormity of Nazi extermination. He argues that many of Wiesel's textual omissions impose themselves on the readers and become 'an additional instrument for transmitting the message' of his texts.¹¹²

Similarly, Nicola Gardini, who has investigated the use of this transitive silence in a number of canonical works of Western literature, has pointed out that in many cases textual lacunae constitute 'un *non dire al fine di dire*' and can be seen as a proper art of telling that has its goal in establishing a more subtle form of communication with readers.¹¹³

Another form of silence exists, however, which does not aim to establish any form of communication. Events that are silenced in this way do not impose themselves on the readers, but remain confined in a textual

¹¹⁰ N. Simborowski, *Secrets and Puzzles: Silence and the Unsaid in Contemporary Italian Writing* (Abingdon: Legenda, 2003), pp. 1-3.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p 8.

¹¹² S. Sibelman, *Silence in the Novels of Elie Wiesel* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 16.

¹¹³ Gardini, *Lacuna: saggio sul non detto* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014), pp. 4, 6.

blind spot, in an area of un-representation from which the narrative discourse diverges. In this thesis this form of complete muteness of the text will be called 'intransitive silence', since it is formed by a series of gaps that try to impede the reader's understanding. This type of silence is more often produced by permanent gaps; however, implicit portions of the text can, at times, also generate a form of silence that, despite the presence of certain hints, resists communication.

Having discussed the nature of the lacunae that may arise in a text and the types of silence they generate, it is now necessary to consider the main rhetorical tools whereby gaps are formed. First of all it must be noted that many gaps are the results of specific literary techniques: certain figures of speech, such as irony, litotes, periphrasis, adynaton, and aposiopesis conceal certain information and by doing so create gaps in the narrative discourse.¹¹⁴ In particular, two figures of speech will prove to be useful in later textual analyses: 'euphemism' and 'cataphasis'.¹¹⁵ All these figures of speech create gaps that belong to the domain of the implicit.¹¹⁶ Moreover, they can often be used to emphasise and reinforce the same

¹¹⁴ Simborowski, *Secrets and Puzzles*, p. 3; McLoughlin, 'Not Writing about War', in *Fighting Words*, pp. 53-57. General definitions of these literary terms can be found in C. Baldick, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹¹⁵ Euphemism is a literary device consisting in the substitution of a word or expression that can be unpleasant with a more mild or indirect one; cataphasis, also known as occupatio, is a figure of speech that states something in the very act of passing it over. This figure of speech is often called 'paralipsis'; this thesis, however, uses this latter term with the specific meaning that Genette confers on it. For an analysis of the relationship between these figures of speech and silence see McLoughlin, 'Not Writing about War', in *Fighting Words*, p. 51.

¹¹⁶ Genette, 'Discours du récit', *Figure III*, p. 93.

concept that they are supposed to elide, generating in this way a transitive silence.¹¹⁷

Other gaps, instead, are created through modifications of the narrative speed. The speed of a narrative depends on the alternation and combination of what Genette calls the four 'narrative movements', i.e. ellipsis, summary, scene, and descriptive pause.¹¹⁸ The first two of these movements produce an acceleration of the narrative speed, since they make the *Erzählzeit*, the time of the narrative, significantly shorter than the *Erzählte Zeit*, the time of the story.

The ellipsis is the fastest of these movements. Genette defines it as a fracture in the temporal continuity of a narrative discourse, generally a 'leap forward'.¹¹⁹ An ellipsis creates a temporal gap between two consecutive passages of a narrative discourse and leaves the events that occurred between the two points in a shell of silence. A summary, instead, consisting in those textual passages where several events of the story are reported and condensed into a few lines, is slower than an ellipsis, but still produces an acceleration of the time of the narrative, which may omit numerous events and open up gaps.¹²⁰

Ellipses and summaries create lacunae that are temporally qualified: the narration speeds up, moves on, and in this way glosses over events that took place at a different time from those that the narrative discourse addresses after the acceleration. Other gaps, instead, are not

¹¹⁷ Textual analyses will however show that this is not always the case and that these figures of speech can also generate an intransitive silence.

¹¹⁸ Genette, 'Discours du récit', *Figure III*, p. 129.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 101, 83 and 92 [my translation].

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 129.

temporal and, therefore, are not due to a speeding up of the narrative discourse. Genette calls this extremely interesting case 'paralipsis', which he defines as a 'lateral omission' that overlooks some constitutive elements of the very same story which the narrative discourse focuses upon.¹²¹

Gaps opened by paralipses take place on a synchronic level, rather than on a diachronic one. These synchronic gaps are usually the result of effects of focalization: by limiting the narration to specific points of view, events that occur at the same time as those narrated, but outside of the specific area of focalisation of the narration, are not reported and in this way they are excluded from what is represented.¹²²

2.4 Silence in the Secondary Corpus

In the narratives that form the secondary corpus of this thesis the Axis War plays an almost irrelevant role. This is due, first of all, to the settings and topics of these stories, which recount events that are entirely set in Italy, mainly during the years of the Civil War, and therefore confer little importance on what happened abroad before 1943.

¹²¹ Ibid., pp. 92-93 [my translation].

¹²² Genette makes the example of Marcel's cousin in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*: this girl must have been in Combray several times; however, she does not appear in any of the scenes set in that town. Only a short mention reveals retrospectively the existence of this girl who, until then, has been probably omitted from the narrative discourse through paralipses, *ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

Moreover, the narrative voices that the authors deploy facilitate the exclusion of a broader depiction of World War II. Moravia's *La ciociara*, Arpino's *L'ombra delle colline* and Pavese's *La casa in collina* and *La luna e i falò* are all narrated by an autodiegetic narrator who is the constant point of focalisation of the story.¹²³ Similarly, Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, despite presenting a heterodiegetic narrative voice, maintains the focalisation of most of the story on Pin, the main character.

As a result of the consistent and restricted focalisation that these narratives adopt, all the events that are represented unfold in Italy around the protagonists of the stories. Although passing mentions testify that the Axis War also takes place in the diegetic world of these narratives, this war is not depicted and it remains outside the area of representation, within an area of zero-texture of the narrative discourse.

Only in Morante's *La Storia* the Axis War manages to appear in representation. This text, not by coincidence, is the only novel of the secondary corpus that contains a narrator who is able to move with freedom among different places.¹²⁴ Despite the majority of the story being set in Rome and focalising on the characters of Ida and Useppe, in the novel there are several digressions that break the prevailing focalisation on the protagonists. This narrative technique allows the representation of

¹²³ On the concepts of heterodiegetic, homodiegetic, and autodiegetic narrators see Ibid., pp. 252-253.

¹²⁴ Morante's narrative voice reveals herself, at times, to be a homodiegetic narrator, but acts through the entire novel as an omniscient one: see S. Wood, 'Excursus as Narrative Technique in *La Storia*', in S. Lucamante, ed., *Elsa Morante's Politics of Writing: Rethinking Subjectivity, History, and the Power of Art* (Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), p. 77.

a broader plurality of events, among which, at the end of the sixth chapter, an episode of the Russian campaign is also narrated.

In order to evaluate Morante's representation of the Axis War it is necessary to look at the overall structure of her book. Several critics have pointed out that *La Storia* is based on a contrast between two ways of conceiving of history. These two conceptions are reflected in the meanings that can be attributed to the word of the title, which are distinguished in both the novel and its criticism by the use of the capital letter: the term 'Storia' refers to all the historical events that are due to the subjugating system of power that dominates society and that usually constitutes the object of historiography; the term 'storia' stands instead for the time in which people live, which will later become the subject of the historiographical discourse.¹²⁵

In Italian this dialectic is intensified by the fact that the word 'storia' also means 'story'. Morante's novel can therefore be seen as a narration on the historical events as they are lived by disempowered people, in opposition to the contents of history, which reflect the oppressive power that dominates human societies.

As several literary critics have stressed, this dialectic emerges through the structure of the novel.¹²⁶ The book is divided into nine chapters, each devoted to a single year. The seven central chapters run

¹²⁵ R. Liucci, *La tentazione della 'casa in collina': il disimpegno degli intellettuali nella guerra civile italiana* (Milan: Unicopli, 1999), p. 120; M. Forti, 'Elsa Morante: "La Storia" senza mito', in Forti, *Narrativa e romanzo nel Novecento italiano: studi critici, ritratti e ricerche* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2009), p. 362; Alfano, *Ciò che ritorna* p. 121; G. Bernabò, *Come leggere La Storia di Elsa Morante* (Milan: Mursia, 1991), p. 33.

¹²⁶ See Forti, 'Elsa Morante', in *Narrativa e romanzo*, p. 363.

from 1941 to 1947; the first and last are instead devoted to an unspecified year of the twentieth century marked by the indeterminate date '19**'. All chapters are divided into two parts: the first short sections, which can be called historical chronicles, report in a dry language that mimics that of a chronology the historical events of the chapter's specific year; the second sections are where the fictional storyworld unfolds. This structure re-proposes the two conceptions of history previously outlined: the historical chronicles represent the domain of 'la Storia', while the fictional sections constitute the domain of 'la storia'.

It is significant to consider what place the Axis War has in a similar structure. In the four chapters devoted to the years 1941-1943 the historical chronicles give strong emphasis to events related to the Axis War, with detailed mentions of all the campaigns in which Italy was involved. However, in the fictional parts of those same chapters there are no references to these events: the narrative sections are entirely set in Rome and nothing is said about what occurs on the foreign fronts.

In the first five chapters of the novel the Axis campaigns do not appear in the diegetic world of the narrative, but remain dry facts that are confined to the historical chronicle and to the domain of historiography. With this choice Morante expresses an implicit, but firm, condemnation of the Axis War, since all the events reported in the historical chronicles are deplored as forms of subjugation begotten by power; at the same time, though, she excludes the Axis War from the possible subjects of literary representation, as other canonical texts do.

Yet, at the end of the sixth chapter on the year 1945, Morante breaks the layer of silence that has surrounded the Axis War. In the last ten pages of this chapter she retrospectively recounts the death of a secondary character, Giovannino Marrocco, during the retreat from the river Don. This passage is extremely notable, because it constitutes the only extensive literary scene on the Axis War that, in thirty years of Italian narrative, was written by an author that did not have any direct experience of an Axis campaign. Moreover, it represents the only significant appearance of the Axis War in the diegetic world of a major Italian novel. For these reasons this scene will be discussed in due course, and it will be examined in relation to other renderings developed by the texts of the main corpus.

Overall *La Storia* can be taken as an embodiment of the extremely marginal role that, by 1974, the Axis War achieved in Italian culture. While the novel constitutes an extremely important vector of memory for events related to the Allied bombings, the Antifascist Resistance in Rome, and the deportation of the Jews, which account for the most numerous and significant episodes of the book, the Axis War remains a marginal event among the experiences of World War II: it is initially confined to the historical chronicles without appearing in the storyworld of the narrative; it is then eventually represented through a unique episode, concerning the death of a single soldier.

As a result of the restricted focalisation adopted by the narrative voices, the texts of the secondary corpus, with the partial exception of Morante's *La Storia*, exclude the Axis War from their storyworlds. Yet, the

narrator is just one of the many voices that mould the narrative discourse: as Bakhtin has shown, novels are polyphonic constructions with multiple levels of voices.¹²⁷ Hence, it is important to consider forms of intradiegetic narrations, since these accounts could introduce elements that the narrative voice does not directly show.¹²⁸

Significantly, in those few moments at which some intradiegetic narrations could provide information on the Axis War the narrative voice resorts to the language of silence and impedes the circulation of further details about it. For instance, at the beginning of *La ciociara* Rosetta — the daughter of Cesira, the autodiegetic narrator of the story — is said to receive several letters from her boyfriend, an unnamed young man who is serving in Yugoslavia. The content of these letters, though, remains unknown. The story, indeed, is narrated by Cesira who does not know what the young man is writing to her daughter.

Even when Rosetta lets her mother read one of the letters, Cesira recollects only one sentence, which is the only information reported about the Italian soldiers in Yugoslavia:

Rosetta mi fece anche leggere l'ultima lettera del suo fidanzato e ricordo soprattutto una frase: 'qui si fa una vita proprio dura. Questi slavi non ci vogliono stare sotto e siamo sempre in stato di allarme'.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in J. Rivkin, M. Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: an Anthology* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2004), p. 674.

¹²⁸ On the concepts of extradiegetic and intradiegetic narrators see Genette, 'Discours du récit', *Figure III*, pp. 238-239.

¹²⁹ Moravia, *La ciociara: romanzo* (Milan: Bompiani, 1957; repr. 1998), p. 12.

This brief mention, which testifies to Italy's role as an occupying force, is the only information that the narrator makes available to readers. The restricted focalisation on what Cesira sees, knows, and decides to report keeps the intradiegetic narrations that the letters could have added out of the narrative discourse.

Later in the story, when Cesira and Rosetta find shelter around Fondi, a group of Germans arrives in the area; among them is Hans, an official who has come back from the Stalingrad front.¹³⁰ Hans attracts the curiosity and attention of many of the locals who ask him about the war and about the Russian campaign. The dialogue among these characters, though, is silenced by the narrator who reports it only in an indirect way, through a summary: 'chi gli domandava quando sarebbe durata la guerra, chi gli chiedeva della Russia dove lui era stato [...] Hans disse che i russi si battevano bene ma i tedeschi si battevano meglio'.¹³¹ By resorting to a summary the narrative speed accelerates, Hans' account is condensed, and minimal information about the war is conveyed.

In *L'ombra delle colline*, the young protagonist appears to be fascinated by the Axis War and likes listening to stories about it. However, these stories remain unknown to the readers, since they are always summarised by the autodiegetic narrator, as in the following complaint: 'raccontate dalle donne, apparivano immiserite e ridicole anche le storie della Russia'.¹³² In this passage the content of the war stories that the

¹³⁰ Ibid., pp. 114-115.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 115.

¹³² G. Arpino, *L'ombra delle colline* (Milan: Mondadori, 1964), p. 110.

protagonist hears is omitted, and the Axis War remains screened by a summary.

Similarly in Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, one of the main characters, the partisan Cugino, has served for more than eighty-three months in the Italian army, as an Alpine soldier in Albania, France, Greece, and North Africa.¹³³ When Pin meets Cugino for the first time, he states that the man speaks a lot about the war and his past. This conversation, however, is reported once again as a summary: 'non sa parlare altro che della guerra che non finisce mai e di lui che dopo sette anni di alpino è costretto a girare ancora con le armi addosso'.¹³⁴ The war experiences of Cugino are not elaborated and remain suspended in an undefined reality that lies outside the visible portions of the diegetic world of the novel.

A consistent use of gaps in relation to intradiegetic accounts on the Axis War can be found also in Pavese's *La casa in collina*. The story is set in the last years of the war in the hills around Torino, and is narrated by Corrado, an Antifascist schoolteacher. Among the various secondary characters that appear in the novel readers find Nando, who has served in the Italian army. On the night of his arrival to 'Le Due Fontane', the tavern where many characters of the story meet up, Nando speaks about his experience in Albania; however this narration is silenced by a summary: 'chiacchierarono a lungo di guerra e di allarmi, quella sera. L'amico di

¹³³ Calvino, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1947); repr. in Calvino, *Italo Calvino: romanzi e racconti*, ed. by C. Milanini (Milan: Mondadori, 2003), p. 96.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

Fonso era stato ferito in Albania'.¹³⁵ The long conversation that the characters have about the war is concealed by this short sentence.

The war, though, remains a hot topic and the characters return to it on another night: 'una sera che Fonso non c'era, discutemmo la guerra sulle cartine dei giornali'.¹³⁶ On this occasion Nando relates some of his war memories. Although some details manage to break through, these memory narratives are once again reported only through a quick summary: 'Nando ci disse cose atroci sugli agguati e sulle rappresaglie nelle montagne della Serbia'.¹³⁷ Something horrendous must have happened in the Italian area of occupation, but nothing more is said about it; problems of agency and responsibility for these 'cose atroci' remain blurred and Nando's war experience remains concealed by a gap.

These examples show that in the cases of intradiegetic narrations the Axis War also remains confined to an area of un-representation. Each time a character brings this topic forward, gaps open up in the narrative discourse, and little or no information is provided. Through the use of summaries the narrators interfere with the characters' accounts, limiting the plurality of their voices. In this way any more thorough representation of the Axis campaigns is impeded and this war remains invisible, confined into permanent gaps enclosed by silence.

Yet, despite being never represented, the Axis War manifests its presence in the texts of the secondary corpus in another way, through the

¹³⁵ Pavese, 'La casa in collina', in Pavese, *Prima che il gallo canti* (Turin: Einaudi, 1949; repr. Milan: Mondadori, 1967), p. 146.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 190.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 190.

sorrow of many Italians, mostly women, who wait at home for the return of their loved ones who have been conscripted. For instance, in *La Storia*, after they have lost their house in the air raids on Rome and have spent some time in the shelter of Pietralata, Ida and Usepe find a room to rent. The house is inhabited by the Marroccos, the family of the soldier Giovannino, whose death will be described at the end of the chapter on 1945. Before this scene, the Axis War is evoked in the diegetic world of the novel through the worries of the women of the family who, while waiting with apprehension for Giovannino's return, obsessively think and speak about him. As the narrator reports 'questo, dei parenti in Russia, era quasi l'unico eterno discorso delle donne'.¹³⁸

Similarly, in Moravia's *La ciociara*, readers know about Rosetta's boyfriend only through the worries of the young girl who is scared for his life, and awaits his return to make their relationship official and get married.¹³⁹ Later in the story, when Cesira and Rosetta move from Rome to the surroundings of Fondi, they meet many people whose relatives are serving abroad in the Italian army. For instance, Paride, a local shepherd, is presented by the narrator as one of the few men who remained in the area: 'tutti gli altri erano sotto le armi, e quasi tutti in Russia'.¹⁴⁰ In another passage the children of the village are described as growing up without their fathers, 'perché erano soldati e li avevano mandati in

¹³⁸ E. Morante, *La Storia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974; repr. 2014), p. 317.

¹³⁹ Moravia, *La ciociara*, pp. 12, 20.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 79.

Russia'.¹⁴¹ One of the women, Anita, Paride's sister-in-law, is often gloomy and melancholy since her husband serves on the Eastern front.¹⁴²

In Arpino's *L'ombra delle colline*, too, the Axis War appears through the sorrow of those who stay at home. Here the campaigns of both Greece and Russia are evoked as the places where the brothers of Doro, a peasant living in the protagonist's family farmhouse, have probably died, while serving in the army.¹⁴³ The loss of the siblings leads Doro to commit suicide.¹⁴⁴

The decision of Arpino's character echoes the fate of another peasant, Valino, in Pavese's *La luna e i falò*. Years after the war, afflicted by economic difficulties and worn by the loss of two children, who 'erano morti in guerra', Valino loses his mind, kills his wife and his old mother, sets the house on fire, and commits suicide.¹⁴⁵ In Arpino's and Pavese's novels readers do not find any details about the Axis campaigns, but they see the devastating and long-lasting effects that the war had on those people who lost someone in it.

All the marginal depictions across the texts of the secondary corpus create a representation of the Axis War as an 'elsewhere', a remote place with no concreteness, which always remains outside the visible world of the narratives in textual portions of zero-texture. No precise information is conveyed about what happens during the war, about what the Italians did there. However, through the representation of the sorrow

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁴² Ibid., pp. 81, 132.

¹⁴³ Arpino, *L'ombra delle colline*, p. 106.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 104-105.

¹⁴⁵ Pavese, *La luna e i falò* (Turin: Einaudi, 1950; repr. 2005), pp. 31-34.

of those who wait at home, the Axis War is implicitly construed as an undefined space in which many Italians suffered and died.

2.5 Silence in the Primary Corpus

This section addresses four texts of the primary corpus: Cancogni's *La linea del Tomori*, Venturi's *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia*, Nesti's *I villaggi bruciano*, and Biasion's collection of short stories *Sagapò*. The analysis will show that even in these texts, which explicitly focus on Italy's participation in the Axis War, it is possible to trace the presence of a layer of silence that affects the representation of the Italian war experience, which often remains confined to textual gaps. Cancogni's novel appears particularly fruitful for a similar assessment; therefore it will be taken as the cornerstone of the analysis.

In the preface of the 2014 re-edition of his book under a new title, Cancogni reveals that ever since the end of World War II he had thought about writing a novel regarding his war experience as an officer in the Italo-Greek war, but this resolution was impeded by the difficulties he encountered when trying to formulate his war story. He eventually overcame this impasse only twenty years later when he decided to approach this subject laterally, by focusing not on the war in itself, but on the process of going to war.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Cancogni, *Signor tenente* (Rome: Elliot, 2014), p. 5. See also Volpini, 'Manlio Cancogni: La linea del Tomori', in Volpini, *Pareri letterari e altro* (Verona: Fiorini, 1973), p. 241. The

La linea del Tomori, published in 1965, reflects the compositional process described by his author. The first part of the novel follows the growth of Silvio, the autodiegetic narrator, from childhood to youth. Cancogni reused material that he had published as short stories in literary journals and assembled ten chapters that deal with different periods of Silvio's existence, from his life as a child in the family's countryside house to his first escapades in the evening in Rome, during secondary school at the 'Liceo Tasso'.¹⁴⁷ The passage from one chapter to another is always marked by an ellipsis: a gap is opened at the end of each chapter and in each new section the protagonist has grown slightly older.

The most sudden of these ellipses is the one that marks the passage from the first to the second part of the book. Readers leave Silvio as a teenager in the streets of Rome and find him again as a graduated Lieutenant of the Italian army who has just arrived at the military depot of his own regiment in the north of Italy, in 1941. Silvio has mixed feelings toward the war; however, he does not have a choice: his battalion is moved first to Bari and then to Albania, where it joins the army that attacked Greece. With this structure *La Linea del Tomori* resembles a coming-of-age story — Volpini has spoken about 'una educazione dei sentimenti' — that has in the war the crucial experience that should mark the beginning of the protagonist's adulthood.¹⁴⁸

book was firstly published as Cancogni, *La linea del Tomori* (Milan: Mondadori, 1965). The subsequent quotations from the text are taken from the more recent edition under the new name.

¹⁴⁷ J. Fiorillo Magri, *Invito alla lettura di Cancogni* (Milan: Mursia, 1986), p. 62.

¹⁴⁸ Volpini, 'Manlio Cancogni', in *Pareri letterari*, p. 242.

Yet, despite the fact that Silvio is inevitably heading to the front, his arrival there is constantly postponed. The war always takes place somewhere yet further away, and Silvio seems unable to cover the gap that separates him from actual combat.

In Durazzo, Albania, the hills at the end of the plain seem to be the location of the front-line, where real battles occur: 'Il fronte è laggiù. Ma da quella parte non viene alcun cenno di vita, nemmeno l'eco di un bombardamento'.¹⁴⁹ At this point war is a distant and silent reality that the protagonist is supposed to discover soon.

The next day, Silvio's battalion leaves the city and its destination appears to be the front-line; instead, they stop in a military camp at the foot of the Tomori Mountain. Here Silvio's unit receives information on the development of the war, which takes place on distant peaks: 'ci ha detto che ogni giorno lassù c'era l'attacco' and 'lassù si combatte da mesi'.¹⁵⁰ The war is once again pushed away, on higher peaks that the protagonist has not reached yet.

The following day the battalion departs heading to the front; when they stop the battle appears to be still far away, but from the new location it is possible to hear its sound: 'era il primo rumore della guerra che si udiva; forse un colpo del mortaio da 81, quel terribile mortaio di cui si parlava come di un personaggio'.¹⁵¹ The Greek positions are ten kilometres away and Silvio's unit is about to move in that direction to reach the most advanced positions on the front. All of a sudden, though,

¹⁴⁹ Cancogni, *Signor tenente*, p. 131.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 138, 142.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p.143.

new orders arrive: a heavy-machine-gun cannot be moved, as there are no spare donkeys for this task. Silvio and a small group of soldiers have to remain there and wait for a mule to be sent back. From that moment on, Silvio and his comrades are cut off from the war, stuck in the camp some kilometres away from the front, where they have nothing to do but wait.

Despite being constantly a near presence, the battles that take place in the storyworld of *La linea del Tomori* remain unrepresented.¹⁵² These battles are confined into areas of zero-texture of the narrative, through paralipses: the focalisation of the story is restricted on Silvio, and while he remains far away from the front the combat cannot enter in the visible portion of the storyworld.

The only traces that manage to break this layer of silence are the sounds — ‘i colpi lontani’ — that for more than a week Silvio and his comrades hear while waiting in the camp for new orders.¹⁵³ On one of these nights, besides the noise, new signs of the war appear: the sparks produced by firing cannons:

L'altra sera, laggiù, c'è stato un lungo scambio di cannonate. Si udivano i colpi e si vedevano qua e là delle scintille come quando si accende l'acciarino sulla pietra focaia. Per tutto il tempo che è durato siamo rimasti a guardare.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² The only partial exceptions are a bombardment that hits the Italian camp, near the location where Silvio pitched his tent, and an air battle that the protagonist observes from a distance, *ibid.*, pp. 153-156.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

Since the war is experienced exclusively from a distance, lights and sounds are the only elements able to cover the gap that separates the protagonists and the readers from the battlefield.

This war represented uniquely from afar is not a peculiarity of Cancogni's account. In Venturi's *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia* the entire story unfolds on the Ionic island occupied by Italian contingents, a place that, during the time of the story, is not at the centre of military operations: 'a Cefalonia la guerra era un brutto ricordo, una cosa che si sapeva continuare da qualche parte, ma in lontananza'.¹⁵⁵ Here, too, war is confined to a remote dimension.

Battles still take place in the storyworld of Venturi's novel, but they occur in distant locations, as in the following passage where a navy battle is described from the point of view of the people on the island:

Allora la guerra riappariva più credibile, laggiù in fondo alla linea dell'orizzonte. Le vampate bianche dei cannoni palpitavano come lampi di calore avanti al temporale, cancellavano un tratto di buio [...] Ma era, anche quella, una guerra senza voce, quasi irreale. Soldati e cefaloti osservavano la battaglia navale dall'alto delle colline [...] finché la battaglia si spegnava, o si allontanava.¹⁵⁶

The blasts lighting up the night sky are the only elements that prove the existence of a war where the Italian army is fighting. A spatial interval runs between the area of focalisation of the story and the locations where combat takes place, and the war remains enclosed in a gap created by paralipses.

¹⁵⁵ M. Venturi, *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia* (Milan: Feltrinelli 1963; repr. Milan: Mondadori 2001), p. 28.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 28-29.

In the stories of *Sagapò*, which are set in Italian-occupied Greece, the depiction of war as a distant phenomenon is even more common. After the conquest of the country, the Italians built several military outposts on mountains and cliffs across the Greek islands as vantage points.¹⁵⁷ Biasion transforms these places into the centre of Italy's war experience: the protagonists of several of his short stories, such as 'La Repubblica di Alconzino' and 'De Profundis', are groups of soldiers who are isolated on these outposts, cut off from the rest of the army and from the war.

When a new soldier arrives at one of these strongholds, the war is presented as a remote problem:

‘Questo che vedi è il caposaldo dello scoglio. Scoglio del vento, lo dovrebbero chiamare. Tutto qui. Vento notte e giorno. Questo è l'unico luogo al riparo. Mai sparato un colpo. Qualche ribelle sulle montagne, che non dà noia. Puoi dormire tranquillo’.¹⁵⁸

For these isolated soldiers the war appears as a distant reality, and, once again, only the sounds are able to cross the span that separates them from actual combat:

Strani rumori giungevano dal mare, diversi da quelli ormai consueti delle onde. Cupi come brontolii di tuono che si protrassero a lungo contro l'alta muraglia costiera. Simili a tonfi, che cessano di colpo e poi riprendevano con sempre maggiore ampiezza [...] Era l'eco di una lontana battaglia navale.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. 375.

¹⁵⁸ R. Biasion, *Sagapò* (Turin: Einaudi, 1953; repr. 1991), p. 106.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 112.

The restricted focalisation on the protagonists of these stories keeps the war out of representation and confines it to gaps created through paralipses. These distant battles remain unknown to the main characters and, as a result, to the readers of the book as well.

In Nesti's *I villaggi bruciano*, instead, a permanent gap covers the entire period of the Italian war campaigns. The text tells the story of Pompeo, an officer of the Italian army in occupied Yugoslavia who, after the 8th of September 1943, abandons his battalion in order to avoid being captured by the Germans. Alone, aloof, and discouraged, Pompeo begins a picaresque adventure across the Balkans, which are divided by a bloodthirsty Civil War. The novel begins as follows:

L'inizio di un'avventura ha sempre qualcosa di affascinante. Così parve anche l'avventura dei partigiani a Pompeo, già capitano di artiglieria a Ragusa di Dalmazia. Messo di fronte al dilemma se darsi prigioniero ai tedeschi o andare al bosco fra i partigiani non aveva avuto esitazione di scelta: il bosco.¹⁶⁰

The entire story unfolds after the 8th of September 1943, which is defined as the beginning of Pompeo's war adventure. The previous war years remain unrepresented, restricted into a portion of zero-texture.¹⁶¹

The text, in fact, reveals little information about the time before Italy's surrender, when Pompeo served in Croatia in the area of Dubrovnik, only noting the names of the cities where he has been and of some of the people he encountered. Apart from these small and

¹⁶⁰ P. Nesti, *I villaggi bruciano* (Florence; Rome: Giannini, 1947), p. 8.

¹⁶¹ Significantly, *I villaggi bruciano* is not the only Italian war novel on World War II that takes place entirely after this date. Also Cancogni's *Il ritorno*, Pirro's *Mille tradimenti*, and Comisso's *Una donna al giorno* are structured in a similar manner; hence, in all these texts the Axis War remains confined in a structural permanent gap.

insignificant hints, nothing is said about the period of the occupation, or about the war that brought Pompeo to the Balkans.

In *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia*, too, the main episodes of the story unfold around the 8th of September 1943 while the events of the Italo-Greek war are kept in textual gaps. Cephalonia is presented as a place that has no relation to warfare: 'Cefalonia era troppo mite, e dolce, per sopportare il peso di una guerra. Gli italiani erano scesi dal cielo e sbucati dal mare senza sparare un colpo'.¹⁶² In this passage the Italian troops are described as if they had arrived on the island out of nowhere, a portrayal that leaves the war of aggression against Greece in a silent gap.

In a later point of the story, when Aldo Puglisi, the officer who is the main protagonist of the historical parts of the novel, remembers the days of the attack against Greece, the combat remains confined again into gaps:

Che non fosse tagliato per la guerra, nonostante le molte divise, non gli ci volle molto a capirlo; bastarono le pianure di Koritza. Più tardi, a campagna ultimata, si rese conto che gli mancava anche la stoffa del conquistatore.¹⁶³

In this passage the entire Italo-Greek war is referred to by the mention of the planes of Korçë, in Albania. This area was occupied by an Italian contingent at the time of the assault and then became the location of a withdrawal when the Greeks counterattacked and advanced into the Albanian territory.¹⁶⁴ After the reference to Korçë, which remains the only

¹⁶² Venturi, *Bandiera bianca*, p. 30.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁶⁴ Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. 264.

implicit allusion to the war campaign, an ellipsis occurs, indicated by the temporal marker 'più tardi': in the space between the two sentences a gap is opened, and the entire Italian military operation falls in it. Nothing is said about what happened in Korçë, or in the months that followed the Italian withdrawal, or when the Italian army advanced in April 1941.

Yet, the most powerful and striking of the permanent gaps covering the Axis War in the texts of the main corpus is that which concludes Cancogni's novel. After the long wait, a donkey finally arrives. The machine-gun can now be transported and Silvio can continue his journey towards the front. After another stop in a new settlement, located just before the actual combat zone, on a dark night Silvio is finally selected to reach the frontline.

While he is running toward the trenches the officer experiences a series of different and contrasting feelings: fear, curiosity, tension, enthusiasm, and frenzy overcome him at once. He then becomes inexplicably calm, overwhelmed by a sense of euphoric folly. In this state of mind Silvio reaches the trenches where he meets other soldiers.

La linea del Tomori ends here. The encounter with the war that has been constantly postponed and distanced throughout the entire text is moved a step further: the novel finishes and the protagonist's direct experience of warfare does not enter in the diegetic world of the narrative, but is sucked into the final gap that concludes the story.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Marco Forti notes that the story culminates in a non-experience that negates the possibility of learning something from warfare: Forti, 'Cancogni sul Tomori', in *Narrativa e romanzo*, p. 471.

Conclusion

In the texts analysed in this chapter, the Axis War is consistently kept outside the visible portions of the diegetic worlds of the narratives. Several possible explanations can be adduced to explain this phenomenon.

Since the time of Stendhal's representation of Fabrice Del Dongo at Waterloo, focusing on the bystanders' incapacity to grasp the reality of warfare from the disarray of the battlefield, many writers have stressed the difficulties that the representation of war creates. McLoughlin argues that, in order to overcome the difficulties inherent in this subject, modern writers tend to approach war in implicit ways.¹⁶⁶ Thus, the consistent exclusion of scenes of combat in the texts considered in this section could be the result of intrinsic difficulties related to war representation.

Moreover, Jaen Kaempfer, in his study on war narratives, has stated that the modern 'récit de guerre' is characterised by a severe restriction of the point of view from which the events are narrated.¹⁶⁷ Hence, the numerous paralipses that lead to the omission of many events of the war could be the consequence of a constituent feature of modern war narratives.

Yet, although these factors contributed to confining the Axis War to textual gaps, this thesis argues that these recurrent and consistent omissions must be also linked to the silence that has surrounded the Axis

¹⁶⁶ McLoughlin, *Authoring War*, pp. 1-7.

¹⁶⁷ J. Kaempfer, *Poétique du récit de guerre* (Paris: J. Corti, 1998), pp. 9-10.

War in Italy's collective memory. In postwar Italy this war constituted an extremely controversial topic, which was hardly discussed in the public sphere. As a result of this marginalisation, representing the Italians as an invading Fascist power involved in an imperialistic war of territorial expansion became extremely problematic. These difficulties resulted in the exclusion of the Axis War from cultural depiction.

Mediated by a series of scarcely significant vectors of memory, this war has been set aside within the Italian cultural field: it has been overlooked by Italian scholars, largely neglected by Italian cinema, and also avoided by Italian writers. Authors of the most important literary vectors of memory of World War II preferred to stay away from this subject and confined any intradiegetic narration about it to textual gaps, through the use of the language of silence.

Signs of this process of oblivion can also be traced within the main corpus. In the four novels considered in this chapter proper scenes of war combat are either presented as a remote reality that takes place in faraway locations or are completely excluded from representation and confined into portions of zero-texture of the narrative discourse.

As a conclusion, it is important to assess the type of silence that the gaps analysed in this chapter generate. In the texts of the secondary corpus, the continuous elision of the Axis War from the diegetic worlds of the narratives obstructs communication with the readers, who cannot refigure what happened in the foreign theatres of war. Similar gaps result in the formation of an intransitive silence that impedes the transmission of knowledge about the Axis War.

Yet, as it was noted, these narratives develop, nonetheless, an implicit representation of this war. By focusing on the long-lasting sorrow of those family members that wait for their loved ones who serve in the army, these texts depict the Axis War as an unknown and inconceivable place where the Italians are doomed to experience hardship and die. Hence this representation, despite impeding the transmission of detailed memory narratives of the Axis War, takes a stand against warfare and puts forward an implicit condemnation of it.

A similar sense of disapproval is also constructed by the texts of the main corpus, which adopt a series of strategies to condemn war, as it will be shown throughout this thesis. The confinement of the Axis War in textual gaps contributes in part to this process. By keeping war unrepresented, writers confine it to the realm of the unspeakable, allowing readers to charge this space of indefiniteness with implicit negative connotations.

A powerful example of this hinted disapprobation is offered by the conclusion of *La linea del Tomori*. When Silvio arrives in the trenches he speaks to some comrades who tell him about the hard time they recently experienced. This account finds an embodiment in something Silvio briefly spotted during his run to the front line: a little 'pianoro pieno di croci di legno', which constitutes the graveyard of the front-line units.¹⁶⁸ The sight of the cemetery helps readers interpret the gaps that throughout the novel have covered the scenes of combat: in this way, war

¹⁶⁸ Cancogni, *Signor tenente*, p. 190.

is implicitly depicted as the encounter with death, as an experience in which many young men inevitably lose their lives.

Across the vectors of memory analysed in this section, silence plays a twofold function, both transitive and intransitive. On the one hand it develops an implicit depiction of the war that leads to its condemnation; on the other hand, though, by eliding any representation of proper war actions, the texts do not go beyond this indirect criticism and hamper the transmission of any detailed account of the Axis War and what the Italians did in it.

Chapter 3: Topoi of Innocence

'Kaidari,
una conca dolc'amara di ulivi
nel mio pigro rammentare — o quelle
navi perplesse al vento del Pireo'.¹

Introduction

This chapter begins a closer investigation of the connections between the literature of the Axis War and the collective memory of World War II by focusing on the most typified and recurrent elements that are woven into the narrative discourses of the texts of the main corpus. In order to do this, the first section turns to narratology and thematic criticism developing a theoretical discussion of some figures of repetition in literary texts, such as the concepts of motif, theme, topos, and type.²

After the theoretical discussion, each of the subsequent four sections will deal with a specific topos characterising the literature of the Axis War. These four topoi constitute recurrent representations that to a greater or lesser extent affect almost all the texts of the main corpus.³ Given their high frequency the analysis does not aim to be exhaustive, but

¹ V. Sereni, 'La ragazza d'Atene', in *Diario d'Algeria* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998), p. 9.

² Despite the fact that this chapter will not deal with the themes of the narratives, which instead will be analysed in Chapter Four, the theoretical proximity between the concepts of motif and theme makes it impossible to speak about the former without considering the latter; hence, the necessity of foregrounding the discussion of both concepts at this stage.

³ The only exceptions being the texts by Malaparte and Cancogni, in which these topoi do not have a significant presence.

it will offer representative selections of examples taken from as many texts as possible, in order to show the recurrence of the topoi and their dissemination across the entire corpus. The conclusion of the chapter will highlight the connections between these typified depictions and the Italian collective memory of World War II.

3.1 Motifs, Themes, Topoi, Types

Motifs and themes are basic terms of literary analysis that are often used in intuitive and non-systematic fashions. A common way of distinguishing between these two concepts can be found in Gerald Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology* on the basis of a twofold idea. Firstly, a theme is seen as a textual structure much more complex than a motif, which, conversely, is conceived of as a simpler unit that may play a part in the construction of a theme. Secondly, the motif tends to be linked to a concrete element, while the theme is usually related to an abstract idea.⁴

These basic assumptions, however, do not lead to widely accepted definitions of the two concepts. In spite of their relevance and their frequent uses, motifs and themes are problematic notions and many scholars have stressed the unresolved theoretical questions raised by these basic terms. Luperini, for instance, has noted that the theoretical scholarship presents a 'persistente difficoltà [...] a definire la nozione di

⁴ G. Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1988), pp. 55, 97.

tema'; Abbott has made the same point, underscoring that the concept of motif 'is especially varied in its meanings'; similarly, Clotilde Bertoni has highlighted problems in the conceptualisation of themes, underlining that the latter are 'nuclei di senso estesi e instabili' which cannot be circumscribed into satisfactory definitions.⁵

If precise definitions of themes and motifs appear problematic, the question of their differentiation, which Remo Ceserani has defined as 'intricata' and 'disperante', is equally fraught.⁶ Segre points out that the nature of this difference has remained imprecise 'sino al punto che le definizioni talora si scambiano tra loro'.⁷ Various scholars have indeed adopted these concepts in contrasting ways, considering as a motif what others have defined as a theme.⁸ For instance, while Prince based his distinction on the concrete-abstract opposition, Theodor Wolpers has spoken about motifs of 'persecution, loneliness, friendship, rivalry, hatred, [and] melancholy', therefore including abstract ideas in the field of the motif.⁹ Similar cases lead Pierluigi Pellini to state that on the terminological questions concerning themes and motifs 'vige la più babelica confusione'.¹⁰

⁵ Luperini, 'Dalla critica tematica all'insegnamento tematico della letteratura: appunti per un bilancio', *Allegoria*, 44 (2003), 114-122 (p. 116); Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, p. 95; C. Bertoni 'Rischi e risorse dello studio dei temi: percorsi possibili', *Allegoria*, 58 (2008), 9-24 (p. 11).

⁶ Ceserani, 'Il punto sulla critica tematica', *Allegoria*, 58 (2008), 25-33 (p. 27).

⁷ Segre, *Notizie dalla crisi*, pp. 212-213.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 213, 216.

⁹ T. Wolpers, 'Motif and Theme as Structural Content Units and "Concrete Universals"', in *The Return of Thematic Criticism*, p. 83.

¹⁰ P. Pellini, 'Critica tematica e tematologia: paradossi e aporie', *Allegoria*, 58 (2008), 61-83 (p. 61).

Given these difficulties, some scholars have chosen not to make a clear distinction between the two terms. For instance Matteo Lefevre, in an article that aims to survey the theoretical discussion on this issue, has argued that: 'l'unico punto fermo per procedere — paradossalmente — consiste dunque nel fatto che nell'ambito della tematica qualsiasi velleità definitoria di tipo univoco e/o aprioristico è destinata a rimanere in posizione di scacco'.¹¹ Similarly, in editing the *Dizionario dei temi letterari*, — the most substantial work ever produced on this subject, which takes into account the international debate since the 1980s — Ceserani, Mario Domenichelli, and Pino Fasano have chosen not to conceptualise a distinction between motifs and themes.¹²

A well-accepted theoretical definition of themes and motifs and a clear means of distinguishing between them thus remain problematic. Hence, it is not possible to articulate a conceptualisation of these two terms that can accommodate the different and contrasting approaches already developed. Yet, rather than keeping the issue unresolved, the present thesis adopts an informed operative understanding of the concepts of themes and motifs that allows the organisation of the textual material for the purpose of the present work. This thesis will rely, therefore, on the understanding of these two concepts developed by literary scholar Daniele Giglioli, who has devoted an important work to

¹¹ M. Lefevre, 'Tema e motivo nella critica letteraria', *Allegoria*, 45 (2003), 5-22 (p. 6).

¹² They do assume, however, that the two are different: Ceserani, M. Domenichelli, P. Fasano, 'Premessa', in Ceserani, Domenichelli, Fasano, eds., *Dizionario dei temi letterari*, 3 vols (Turin: Utet, 2007), I, p. vi.

this matter.¹³ Giglioli's conceptualisation will be integrated with reflections of other scholars such as Segre, Luperini, Abbott, and Prince.

According to Giglioli the most profitable way to distinguish between motifs and themes is to see them as the results of two different modalities of approaching and reading a text. He suggests conceiving of motifs as recurrent textual elements that can be pinpointed through a descriptive survey of the narrative discourse;¹⁴ meanwhile he proposes to see themes as the result of readers' acts of interpretation.¹⁵

According to this conception, motifs constitute 'unità di segmentazione del contenuto'; they are simple textual units that mould a narrative discourse. Identifying certain motifs means looking for textual elements that recur in a text, or in a series of texts, without addressing issues of interpretation. As Giglioli puts it, the motif 'deve per forza arrestarsi sulla soglia dell'ufficio ermeneutico [...] la loro sfera di influenza arriva ai confini del problema del senso, non li oltrepassa'.¹⁶

By contrast, Giglioli's idea of the theme pertains to the domain of the meanings created by a narrative. According to this view a theme is not a textual element that moulds the narrative discourse; hence it cannot be pinpointed in a single portion of a text. Themes, instead, rely entirely on the interpreting gaze of the reader: by making connections between different parts and construing particular passages in certain ways, readers can discern a series of themes that stem from the narrative

¹³ D. Giglioli, *Tema* (Milan: La Nuova Italia, 2001).

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 86.

discourse of a text.¹⁷ The process of identification of certain themes — the act of thematisation — allows meanings to emerge from a narrative; hence, it constitutes a pivotal part of the process of textual interpretation.¹⁸

Giglioli's conceptualisation implies that themes and motifs are different, but also closely connected. The reader's recognition of a theme is based on the interpretation of certain textual passages, which also entails the interpretation of the motifs that are contained within those passages. It follows that different motifs can contribute to the creation of the same theme and that a given theme can be identified by the conjunction of various motifs.¹⁹

Such relation between themes and motifs is consistent with that outlined by several scholars. Prince, for instance, defines a motif as a 'minimal thematic unit';²⁰ Segre calls it a 'germe tematico';²¹ Luperini designates it as a 'cellula dell'organismo tematico [che contribuisce] così a strutturarlo';²² Doležel remarks that 'le thème peut être défini comme un agglomérat structuré de motifs récurrents'.²³ All these definitions see motifs as textual units that contribute to the articulation of themes, which

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 18, 25, 92, 109.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 120. On the relation between thematisation and interpretation see also J. Phelan, *Reading People Reading Plots: Character, Progression and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 21.

¹⁹ Segre, *Avviamento all'analisi del testo letterario* (Turin: Einaudi, 1985), p. 335; Segre, *Notizie dalla crisi*, p. 216.

²⁰ Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology*, p. 55.

²¹ Segre, *Avviamento all'analisi*, pp. 340-341.

²² Luperini, 'Dalla critica tematica all'insegnamento', *Allegoria*, p. 117.

²³ Doležel, 'Le Triangle du double: un champ thématique', *Poétique*, 64 (1985), 463-472 (p. 463).

constitute complex entities that cannot be reduced to anyone of the various motifs that participate in their construction.²⁴

This conceptualisation of motifs and themes offers the basis for the understanding of another element of literary repetition that will represent the main point of concern of this chapter: the concept of the topos. The critical work that is generally indicated as a point of departure for the study of literary topoi is Ernst Robert Curtius' 1948 *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. In this work the scholar defines the topos as a 'cliché, which can be used in any form of literature'.²⁵ In particular, he uses the term topos to refer to all those images, figures, and 'trains of thoughts' — such as, for instance, the *locus amoenus* or the *puer senex* — that from classical rhetoric entered into Western literary genres and became recurrent elements of literary depiction.²⁶ For Curtius, therefore, the topos constitutes a traditional image that reappears in cultural production across a long period of time.

Francesco Orlando has noticed that as a result of this conceptualisation the study of literary topoi has been generally carried out along diachronic lines and has usually focused on issues of genealogy; by contrast, the study of topoi in a synchronic perspective has been far less common.²⁷ This thesis moves in this second direction. The concept of the topos will be used to pinpoint a series of recurrent elements that have

²⁴ Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, p. 95.

²⁵ E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Age* (London: Routledge, 1953; repr. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press 2013), p. 70.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 70.

²⁷ Orlando, *Gli oggetti desueti nelle immagini della letteratura: rovine, reliquie, rarità, robaccia, luoghi inabitati e tesori nascosti* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), p. 67.

characterised the Italian literature of the Axis War in a relatively short timeframe, the years 1944–1974. Rather than focusing on the genealogy of these images, the main aim of this study will be to spot their consistent presence within the corpus, which will be addressed from a synchronic perspective.

Giglioli groups the topos together with the motif, since he sees it as ‘un elemento oggettivamente riscontrabile’, rather than ‘un concetto interpretativo’.²⁸ For him a topos is simply a motif that has been traditionally institutionalised; it is what he calls a ‘molecola della tradizione’ that has been repeated and has become a sort of cliché, a commonplace, within a given tradition.²⁹ Luperini also argues that the topos ‘può identificarsi col motivo’; similarly Segre speaks about the topos as ‘un motivo codificato dalla tradizione culturale’.³⁰

Other scholars have also grouped the topos with the motif, but have stressed a difference between the two concepts. Prince, for instance, has suggested that a topos should be seen as a ‘stable disposition of motifs’;³¹ similarly Sergio Zatti has defined the topos as ‘una configurazione strutturata e relativamente stabile di motivi’.³² The latter conceptualisations highlight the fact that a topos, such as for instance the *locus amoenus*, cannot be seen as a simple recurrent textual unit, but

²⁸ Giglioli, *Tema*, p. 80.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 339.

³⁰ Segre, *Avviamento all'analisi*, p. 339.

³¹ Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology*, p. 98.

³² S. Zatti, ‘La critica tematica’, in S. Brugnolo, ed., *La scrittura e il mondo: teorie letterarie del Novecento* (Rome: Carocci, 2016), p. 267.

rather as a complex and compound construction stemming from the combination of various motifs into a cluster.

This thesis will conceive of the topos in accordance with this view, as a recurrent and typified cluster of comparable, but varied, motifs. Despite their richer and more elaborate form, topoi will remain the result of the same descriptive study of the narrative discourse through which motifs are identified; therefore questions concerning their interpretation will not be addressed in depth until the next chapter, which considers whether these topoi contribute to creating certain themes.

A last literary concept related to repetition, which is strongly associated to the topos, is the 'type'. Abbott defines it as 'a kind of character that recurs across a range of narrative texts'.³³ He notes that while complex and rounded characters are usually the result of the combination of different types, there are also 'flat' characters that possess only well-codified features and therefore embody only one single type, what he calls a 'stereotype'.³⁴

As Fussell has noted, war narratives are often characterised by the presence of these flat and typified figures, since many of these stories tend to fit people into 'cliché classifications' and 'simplified sketches'.³⁵ In this thesis the term type will be used to refer to these recurrent typified characters. Topoi and types will be closely linked, since it will be pointed out that certain topoi are often embodied in specific recurrent types.

³³ Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, p. 243.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 243.

³⁵ Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behaviour in the Second World War* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 115.

3.2 The Sagapò Army

The first topos that will be addressed goes by the name of the 'Army of love', or 'Sagapò army', an expression that transliterates the Greek phrase *Σ'αγαπώ*, i.e. 'I love you'. According to this topos, not only did the main concern of Italian soldiers serving in the areas of occupation consist in seducing local women and having love affairs, but many of these soldiers were extremely successful in this aim.

Many sources attest that the expression Sagapò army finds its origin in a nickname that the Allies gave to the Italian troops that had occupied Greece. One of the earliest sources to report this alleged origin is a memoir on the occupation of Greece, *Incubi nel tascapane*, written in 1950 by Riccardo Giannini, in which it can be read that 'l'undicesima Armata fu battezzata ironicamente dalla propaganda Anglo-Americana "armata sagapò" ovvero sia armata dell'amore'.³⁶ This presumed genesis was then re-proposed in 1953 by Renzi, in his article 'L'armata s'agapò'.³⁷

Since then several historians and literary scholars have reported this alleged origin and claimed that the expression Sagapò army had initially been used either by the Allies, or by BBC radio propaganda.³⁸ Other scholars have been rather sceptical about this source and have

³⁶ R. Giannini, *Incubi nel tascapane* (Rome: L'Arnia, 1950), p. 21.

³⁷ Renzi, 'L'armata s'agapò', *Dall'Arcadia a Peschiera*, p. 36.

³⁸ A. Cattaneo, A. Oleari, 'L'armata S'agapò: il processo al bravo soldato italiano', in G. Forti, C. Mazzucato, A. Visconti, eds., *Giustizia e letteratura*, 3 vols (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2014), II, p. 749; S. Cavalli, 'L'amore al tempo della guerra di Grecia', in R. Cicala, V. La Mendola, *Libri e scrittori di via Biancamano*, p. 252; S. Giovacchini, 'Soccer with the Dead: *Mediterraneo*, the Legacy of *Neorealismo*, and the Myth of *Italiani brava gente*', in M. Paris, ed., *Repicturing the Second World War: Representations in Film and Television* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 61.

claimed that the expression was more likely a creation of the Greeks.³⁹ Historian Marco Clementi has advanced a different interpretation: he argues that the name was actually a creation of the British, but only at a later stage of the war, after the imprisonment of Italian POWs following the 8th of September 1943.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, none of the studies surveyed for this thesis presents any pieces of historical evidence supporting the aforementioned claims, which are always stated without any academic reference. Hence the question of the origin of the topos' name remains obscure. Given the presence of Greek words the expression might well be the creation of Greek soldiers. However, if one gives credit to the sources that insist on the British origin of the nickname — and therefore rules out the possibility that it was instead a creation of the Italians themselves — the expression must have had a limited diffusion and was not the result of nationally organised war propaganda, since nothing has been found in general studies on this issue.⁴¹

The Italian literature of the Axis War is strongly affected by the topos of the Sagapò army, whose presence can be pinpointed in almost every text of the main corpus. For instance in Luigi Preti's *Giovinezza*, *Giovinezza* when Ferrari, a veteran of the Eastern front, narrates the

³⁹ Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. 374; E. Aga Rossi, M. T. Giusti, *Una guerra a parte: i militari italiani nei Balcani 1940-1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), p. 34.

⁴⁰ M. Clementi, *Camicie nere sull'Acropoli: l'occupazione italiana in Grecia 1941-1943* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2013), pp. 343-344.

⁴¹ B. Moore, K. Fedorowich, *The British Empire and its Italian Prisoners of War 1940-1947* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); I. Insolubile, *Wops: i prigionieri italiani in Gran Bretagna 1941-1946* (Naples; Rome: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 2012); E. Lo Biundo, *London calling Italy. La propaganda di Radio Londra nel 1943* (Milan: Unicopli, 2014); M. Petraki, *The Metaxas Myth: Dictatorship and Propaganda in Greece*, (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006).

occupation of Ukraine he chooses to foreground the love affairs of the soldiers as a constituent feature of that experience:

Con tutta somiglianza fiorì più di un amore. Certo è che le camicie dei militari venivano ben lavate, e ancor più certo è che pagnotte e scatolette passavano dai magazzini alle povere case degli ucraini.⁴²

In this passage the relation between occupiers and occupied is described as mutually positive thanks to a series of interpersonal favors that are initiated by the relationships between soldiers and local women.

At another point in the story, the extradiegetic narrator represents the occupation of Southern France in an almost identical manner:

A dispetto della guerra, fiorivan nella luce del sole gli idilli tra soldati d'Italia e donne di Francia, come se fosse la cosa più naturale del mondo. Le mogli e le fidanzate sembravano lontane migliaia di chilometri.⁴³

Here, the love affairs between the soldiers and the locals are presented as a natural consequence of the presence of an occupying army.

The idea of the spontaneity of these love stories also appears at the beginning of Pirro's *Jovanka e le altre*. While describing the tensions between the Italians and the Slovenians in occupied Ljubljana, the narrator underlines that in the first days of the occupations the atmosphere was different:

Non era stato sempre così. Subito dopo l'entrata a Lubiana, quasi prima che la bandiera tricolore salisse sulla torre municipale e sventolasse ai balconi degli edifici pubblici, si era

⁴² L. Preti, *Giovinezza, Giovinezza* (Milan: Mondadori, 1964; repr. 1974), p. 286.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 295.

fatto l'amore un po' dappertutto, si mangiava insieme ai civili senza pensare alla guerra. Ma poi, a poco a poco, erano finite le amicizie.⁴⁴

Even in a passage that aims to stress the tensions created by the presence of the Italians in foreign lands, the narrator speaks about the love affairs between soldiers and local women as an intrinsic feature of the occupation.

Such a depiction is also suggested in a passage of Rigoni Stern's 'Ritorno sul Don' — the short story that concludes and gives the name to the entire collection. Years after the war, the autodiegetic narrator goes to the Soviet Union to visit the places where he fought, in a trip that becomes a journey through his own war memories. In a restaurant in the town of Rossoch, where he stops to buy food for his journey, Rigoni meets a waitress who, as soon as she realises that the guest is Italian, blushes with emotion:

E vedo il suo viso trasfigurarsi: impallidire, arrossire, gli occhi illuminarsi e inumidirsi; sorridere, infine. Non riusciamo a parlarci. Questa donna che per l'emozione non è capace di avvolgere il pacchetto, allora avrà avuto vent'anni. Mi dice 'Dasvidània!' E poi, in italiano, 'Arrivederci'. E nient'altro.⁴⁵

The girl is overcome by the memories of her youth during the Italian occupation. Her smile suggests that the recollection relates to a merry period of her life, while the fact that she blushes presupposes a personal and emotional involvement. Hence, the passage suggests that the girl was

⁴⁴ Pirro, *Jovanka* (Milan: Bomipiani, 1959), p. 10.

⁴⁵ Rigoni Stern, *Ritorno sul Don* (Turin: Einaudi, 1973; repr. 1990), pp. 305-306.

the lover of an Italian soldier, from whom she learns the few words of Italian she knows.

Despite the importance that the topos of the Army of love possesses for the representation of all the Italian occupations, it is in the texts set in Greece that this topos achieves particular centrality. This fact can be attributed to the media coverage of the Renzi-Aristarco case, which in the 1950s established a strong connection between the expression *Sagapò* army and the occupation of Greece.

Prior to this scandal, though, another author had already established this link. Renzo Biasion's *Sagapò* is a collection of short stories all set in occupied Greece which strongly foregrounds the love stories of the Italians. Despite the fact that the book was published at the end of 1953, in the same weeks as the sentencing of the Renzi-Aristarco trial, the text's genesis was unrelated to the court case.⁴⁶ In fact the book title stemmed from a short story that Biasion had already published in 1949 on 'La Rassegna d'Italia'.⁴⁷ In this story one of the main characters is Ketty, a young Greek prostitute who works in an Italian military brothel and who has been nicknamed *Sagapò*, after a famous Greek song of the time.⁴⁸

Biasion's book offers numerous examples of the topos of the Army of love. For instance, the soldier who is the protagonist of the short story 'Katina' describes in these terms the battalion where he ends up in the

⁴⁶ See the letter that Biasion sent to Calvino on the 14th of September 1953 in V. Camerano, R. Crovi, G. Grasso, A. Tosone, G. Lupo, eds., *La storia dei Gettoni di Elio Vittorini*, 3 vols (Turin: Nino Aragno, 2007), II, p. 729.

⁴⁷ Biasion, 'Sagapò', *La Rassegna d'Italia*, 9 (1949), 879-898.

⁴⁸ Biasion, *Sagapò*, p. 51.

stronghold of Heraklion: 'si sarebbe detto che nel plotone, sotto il paterno commando del maresciallo Lo Guercio, l'amore fosse diventato di casa, e indispensabile come il sale nella minestra'.⁴⁹

Similarly, in the short story 'Sagapò' the soldiers fraternize with the locals and often pay visits to their houses in order to spend time with the young women who live there: as the narrator notes 'a lungo andare qualche idillio era sorto, gelosamente nascosto dalle ragazze, timorose sempre del futuro'.⁵⁰ Love affairs are at the centre of so many of Biasion's short stories that some reviewers have even argued that, despite being completely set in Italian-occupied Greece, *Sagapò* should not be considered a book about warfare.⁵¹

In many texts the topos of the Sagapò army is often articulated through representations of military prostitution. During World War II military brothels were in no way a peculiarity of the Italians and each army had its own arrangements.⁵² The texts of the main corpus, though, especially those concerning the occupation of Greece, confer strong emphasis on this aspect.

The female protagonists of many of Biasion's short stories are Greek prostitutes who, because of the misery and difficulties caused by the war, have begun to work into Italian brothels. Similarly, Pirro's *Le soldatesse* tells the story of a young Lieutenant to whom is assigned a

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 78.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 35.

⁵¹ Cavalli, 'L'amore al tempo della guerra di Grecia', in *Libri e scrittori di via Biancamano*, p. 248; This interpretation was firstly proposed by Vittorini in the book jacket he wrote for the first edition of *Sagapò*, now in Vittorini, *I risvolti dei gettoni*, ed. by C. De Michelis (Milan: Scheiwiller, 1988), p. 68.

⁵² D. Rodogno, *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo*, p. 200.

peculiar task: protecting a convoy of young Greek prostitutes during a journey across Greece and accompanying the girls to the various Italian camps where they would begin their profession in the Italian military brothels, as 'nuove reclute dell'armata sagapò'.⁵³ Given the connection between the occupation of Greece and prostitution, it is not surprising that when in 1965 Giancarlo Fusco edited a volume on the theme of legal prostitution, the writer Luigi Silori decided to write a short story that is entirely set inside a brothel in occupied Athens.⁵⁴

The fact that the representation of the occupation of Greece became so strongly associated with the love affairs of the Italian soldiers seems partially due to the Mediterranean landscape, which, with the mildness of its weather, offered the perfect setting for stories that focused on the allegedly pleasant aspects of the occupation.⁵⁵ In fact, in texts set in Greece— and only in these— the topos of the Army of love is modulated by the use of another motif: that of the holiday.

For instance, in *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia* the Lieutenant Aldo Puglisi declares that were it not for a sense of nostalgia for ones' beloved 'potremmo considerarci in villeggiatura'.⁵⁶ This opinion is reinforced by the narrator who, a few pages later, describes the battalions that have

⁵³ Pirro, *Le soldatesse* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1956; repr. Palermo: Sellerio, 2000), p. 31.

⁵⁴ L. Silori, 'Le "case chiuse" di guerra: La "casa" di Atene', in Fusco, ed., *Quando l'Italia tollerava* (Rome: Canesi, 1965), pp. 245-266.

⁵⁵ Despite stressing that across Italian-occupied Greece the level of repressive violence tended to be low — especially in the islands — Rochat argues that the idea that this area remained alien to violence is untenable: Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. 373. Rodogno has shown that across all the areas occupied by the Italians the army applied the same policy for what concerned the control of the territory and the suppression of dissent: Rodogno, *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo*, p. 397.

⁵⁶ Venturi, *Bandiera bianca*, p. 32.

occupied the city of Argostoli, on the island of Cephalonia, as a group of schoolboys during a holiday by the sea:

Spesso su un tratto di spiaggia sassosa, poco discosto dalla villa, capitava una squadra di soldati. Arrivavano di corsa, come scolaretti usciti di scuola, si spogliavano in fretta, vociando, sempre più nudi nella luce del sole; finché restavano col solo bianco delle mutande. Allora, battendo le braccia, si buttavano in mare.⁵⁷

Such a depiction is not exceptional and can also be found in Biasion's *Sagapò*. In two short stories, 'La Repubblica di Alconziona' and 'De Profundis', the protagonists, who are cut off from the war in isolated lookouts on coastal cliffs, spend their time swimming in the sea, playing games in the water, sunbathing, and singing, oblivious to both the war and military discipline:

Gli uomini si buttarono nell'acqua, chiamandosi l'un l'altro, giocando come bambini in vacanza. [...] Un soldato preso l'aire, cantò a squarciagola, in mezzo a un gruppo di fanti che si battevano le palme sulle cosce per scandire il ritmo della canzone.⁵⁸

In this passage the war appears, once again, as a faraway reality, and the soldiers can be depicted as 'vacationers' and 'permanent-tourists'.⁵⁹

In this holiday-like atmosphere the soldiers can devote their efforts to the activity that interests them the most, i.e. chasing local

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

⁵⁸ Biasion, *Sagapò*, p. 117.

⁵⁹ These expressions are used by Saverio Giovacchini to describe the protagonist of the 1992 film *Mediterraneo*, whose screenplay, written by Enzo Monteleone, was inspired by Biasion's collection, Giovacchini, 'Soccer with the Dead', *Repicturing the Second World War*, pp. 59, 69.

women. In 'La Repubblica di Alconzino', the isolated soldiers find a poor lonely young girl, traumatised by the war, who becomes their lover:

Dopo il bagno si stendevano tutti al sole. Per un pudore quasi incosciente di fronte alla donna anche Alconzino, Scudo e Marruca si coprivano alquanto. Un torpore dolce li prendeva. Alconzino dava ordine a Scudo di cantare [...] Poi giocavano sulla rena come fanciulli in vacanza provando piacere a esibirsi in giochi di forza di fronte alla giovinetta.⁶⁰

It is important to stress that in this short story, as in many other cases across the corpus, the love stories of the Italians are not portrayed as forms of exploitation of local women carried out by the invaders as a result of the position of power they have achieved in an imperialistic war of aggression.⁶¹ By contrast, these love stories are presented as genuine and consensual.

For instance in *Sagapò* the relationship between the soldier Pagliarulo and Katina, a young orphan who was already a prostitute before the arrival of the Italians, evolves into a romantic affair:

Katina, che amava per la prima volta, era sensibile alle delicatezze quasi femminili di Pagliarulo. Egli la trattava come una ragazza per bene, come una fidanzata. [...] Ritornavano assieme fin nell'interno del vallone, tenendosi per mano come due innamorati alle prime passeggiate; provando l'uno verso l'altra quella tenerezza dolce e un po' grave che solo può suscitare l'amplesso tra persone che si amano.⁶²

⁶⁰ Biasion, *Sagapò*, p. 18.

⁶¹ Only two texts of the corpus develop this view, as will be analysed in the Epilogue of the thesis.

⁶² Biasion, *Sagapò*, pp. 79-80.

In this passage, as in the excerpts quoted above, the woman does not succumb to the power of the occupier, but rather falls in love and consensually chooses to stay with him.

On several occasions the texts insist on the fact that these love stories are possible because of the capacity of certain soldiers who are exceptional lovers and skillful seducers. These figures form a recurrent literary type that can be called the 'Sagapò soldier'. This type, who generally is not the protagonist of the story, is an indolent, athletic, good-looking man, who is, above all, a womanizer.⁶³ The Sagapò soldier does not care about the war, but lives only for the love of women, as he has always done through his life.

An overview of this literary type can identify many examples. In Mario Terrosi's *La casa di Novach* readers find Lombardi, a soldier who struggles to get used to the small Slovenian village where he has been sent because, as the autodiegetic narrator comments, 'come avrebbe potuto adattarsi, lui, a vivere in un misero villaggio, senza possibilità di avere ogni sera, come a Soriano e a Roma, una donna a sua disposizione?'.⁶⁴

Similarly, in *Jovanka e le altre* there is sergeant Rocco di Candia who, in spite of the growing tensions with the population of Ljubljana, 'continuava a vivere come in una città italiana: era un bel ragazzo dai capelli lunghi che piaceva alle donne e non sapeva privarsi di nulla'.⁶⁵ Di Candia's capacity of seduction is the result of a natural talent:

⁶³ The only text featuring this type of soldier as a protagonist is Comisso's *Una Donna al Giorno*.

⁶⁴ M. Terrosi, *La casa di Novach* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1956), p. 8.

⁶⁵ Pirro, *Jovanka*, p. 8.

Rischiava ogni sera la vita per una carezza e sapeva spingere anche le ragazze a rischiare. Le convinceva senza lunghi discorsi, bastavano le sue lunghe e chiassose risate a renderle spregiudicate e pronte al rischio, perché anche le ragazze rischiavano a sorridergli.⁶⁶

Another example of this type is the figure of Musso in Biasion 'Sagapò':

Musso era bello, alto membruto, lascivo. Due sottili baffetti ornavano le labbra grosse, e leggermente prominenti. [...] Come gran parte dei compagni era afflitto da ogni sorta di malattia venerea. [...] Indolente, apatico, vorace, tutta la sua vita consisteva nella soddisfazione della sensualità.⁶⁷

In order to understand the formation of these typified figures it is useful to resort to the scholarship on the international stereotype that, since the second half of the twentieth century, has become commonly labelled 'Latin Lover'.

In her study on the stereotype of the Latin Lover in relation to the public figure of Marcello Mastroianni, Jacqueline Reich configures this conventional representation of masculinity in a man characterised by 'displays of passion of the Mediterranean heat, his creative means of seduction, active sex drive, lack of inhibitions, and exceedingly polite, sophisticated and cultured manner'.⁶⁸ Similarly, Luigi Settembrini has described the Latin Lover as a man characterised by a series of

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶⁷ Biasion, *Sagapò*, p. 38.

⁶⁸ J. Reich, *Beyond the Latin Lover: Marcello Mastroianni, Masculinity, and Italian Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 27.

conventionalised traits such as 'un'intensità passionale o calore mediterraneo' and 'una certa gentilezza e delicatezza di modi'.⁶⁹

Although this stereotype possesses deep roots in Western culture in connection to the figure of the Libertine, embodied by famous characters such as Don Juan and Casanova, both Settembrini and Reich see the associations of Italian men with this stereotype as a result of the construction of a form of otherness fostered firstly by Northern European and then American culture.

According to Settembrini between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at the time of the Grand Tour, north Europeans idealised Italy, not only as the cradle of Classical Antiquity, but also as embodiment of several values promoted by Romantic culture, such as beauty, nature, and love.⁷⁰ As a result of this process the Italians were seen as passionate and ardent people, a belief that was reinforced in the twentieth century by American cinema.⁷¹

These views impacted on the self-perceptions of the Italians, according to a process similar to what Silvana Patriarca has called 'traffico di stereotipi': impressions about the Italians developed by foreigners influenced the views that the Italians had about themselves, affecting their self-representations, which, in return, confirmed the foreign perceptions.⁷²

⁶⁹ L. Settembrini, 'A sud della passione: divagazione di viaggio', in G. Malossi, ed., *Latin lover: a sud della passione* (Milan: Charta, 1996), pp. 66-67.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 67-68.

⁷¹ Reich, *Beyond the Latin Lover*, p. 26.

⁷² S. Patriarca, *Italianità: la costruzione del carattere nazionale* (Rome; Bari: Laterza, 2010), p. xviii; Settembrini, 'A sud della passione', in *Latin lover*, pp. 70-71.

Reich argues that in Italy the stereotype of the Latin Lover influenced the construction of the idea of national character and contributed to centring male identity on a strong sense of performative masculinity.⁷³ The formation of the topos of the Sagapò army in the literature of the Axis War can be seen as a result of this process. Several texts across the corpus, indeed, emphasise the connection between performative masculinity and the Italian national character.

For instance, in Raul Lunardi's *Diario di un soldato semplice* readers encounter Lieutenant Secchi, another example of a Sagapò soldier, who is presented as an embodiment of national virility:

Il mio amico aveva fama tra noi di un fortunato dongiovanni. E a vederlo così piccolo e insignificante si stentava a crederlo, ma egli era quello che gli stranieri dicono 'un fuoco italiano'. Era bruno e aveva gli occhi neri e il viso aperto: di più aveva un piacevole modo di cantare. [...] E il mio amico non chiedeva esclusività alle sue avventure amorose.⁷⁴

The text presents Secchi's success with women as an inescapably Italian feature. Similarly, in Renzi's screenplay the love drives of the Italian soldiers are presented as a result of 'un caratteristico istinto nazionale: "il gallismo"'.⁷⁵

The link between Italianness and performative masculinity also emerges in Pirelli's *L'entusiasta*. When the protagonist, the officer Pietro Andreis, arrives in Albania, he discovers the disorganization and corruption of the zone behind the front, embodied by Aldo Parodi, an

⁷³ Reich, *Beyond the Latin Lover*, pp. 5, 27.

⁷⁴ Lunardi, *Diario di un soldato semplice* (Turin: Einaudi, 1952), p. 41.

⁷⁵ Renzi, 'L'armata s'agapò', in *Dall'Arcadia a Peschiera*, p. 36.

officer of the air force who does everything he can to avoid the front line. Disgusted by this behavior, Andreis declines Parodi's invitation for dinner and the latter sadly comments: 'peccato. Dopo la mensa ti avrei fatto fare un po' di baldoria. Se c'è un servizio che funziona a perfezione, da noi, è il servizio del c[azzo]. Non per niente siamo Italiani'.⁷⁶ All these passages establish direct links between Italianness and performative masculinity and by doing so they contribute to articulating and strengthening the topos of the Army of love.

Throughout the corpus this topos provides a series of diversified but consistent depictions of Italian men in the time of war: some of them portray the Italians as gentle, charming, and sensitive lovers, who engage women in romantic love stories; others represented them as passionate, lustful, and hot-blooded seducers, whose only aim is having sexual intercourse. All these figures, though, are characterised by an unrestrained passion for women and, importantly, by a rejection of any violent manner. As a result, through the topos of the Army of love, several texts of the main corpus represent the Italians as soldiers who are more involved in their relationships with local women than in waging the Axis War.

⁷⁶ Pirelli, *L'entusiasta* (Turin: Einaudi, 1958); repr. in Pirelli, *L'altro elemento: quattro romanzi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1965), p. 33.

3.3 The Good Italian Soldier

Another regularly recurring topos is that of 'the Good Italian', or 'the Good soldier', a representation that relates to what has become commonly known as the myth of 'Italiani brava gente'.⁷⁷ Focardi has described the typified depiction of Italianess that this stereotype puts forward as a man who is 'avverso alla guerra, recalcitrante a compiere atti di violenza e sopraffazione, pronto a solidarizzare e a portare soccorso alle popolazioni indifese, comprese quelle dei territori occupati dal fascismo'.⁷⁸

According to Patriarca the myth of the Good Italian originated in the Catholic milieu in the years following the unification; in that period:

I commentatori cattolici tendevano a rimarcare, con atteggiamento paterno e paternalistico, l'idea che gli Italiani fossero fondamentalmente brava gente, una popolazione essenzialmente 'contadina', molto vicina alla Chiesa e attaccata alla famiglia.⁷⁹

Focardi, too, links the formation of this view to Catholic culture, while Angelo del Boca has instead traced its origin in the colonialist propaganda of the nineteenth century.⁸⁰

The topos of the Good Italian affects almost every text of the main corpus. In a few cases it is even possible to find the topos expressed in explicit forms. For instance in Nesti's *I villaggi bruciano*, when the officer

⁷⁷ The scholarship on this stereotype is today quite extensive, see Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente ?*, pp. 11-49; Fogu, 'Italiani brava gente', in *The Politics of Memory*, p. 147; Patriarca, *Italianità*, pp. 208-218; D. Bidussa, 'Il mito del bravo italiano', in *Crimini di guerra*, pp. 113-132.

⁷⁸ Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*, p. x.

⁷⁹ Patriarca, *Italianità*, p. 124.

⁸⁰ Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*, pp. 180-182. Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?*, pp. 47-48.

Pompeo enters a village in Croatia and an old man tries to attract his attention and speak to him, the narrator states: '[l'uomo] gli voleva parlare ma non sapendo l'italiano si limitò solo ad un *Dobri ljudi taljani, dobri...* ("buona gente gl'italiani") che gli scoppiò irresistibilmente dalla bocca larga'.⁸¹ Literary critic Walter Nesti has considered this passage as one of the first formulations of the expression *Italiani brava gente* in a narrative work.⁸²

Besides similar straightforward occurrences, across the corpus this topos is more often embodied in a typified figure: a goodhearted soldier who appears alien to the violence of war. As a representative example one can consider the portrait that Biasion makes of the soldier Pagliarulo:

Era simpatico a tutti. Qualche cosa nella sua faccia costringeva, guardandolo, a sorridere. [...] Naturalmente portato alla gioia, spesso cantava. Oppure tratta di tasca una piccola armonica a fiato, dopo averla ripulita contro la manica con un gesto abituale, la portava alla bocca tenendola delicatamente tra le mani del colore dell'ulivo.⁸³

Not only is Pagliarulo an example of the Sagapò soldier, but with his natural sense of joy and his love for music he appears as a peaceful and non-belligerent individual who embodies the qualities of the Good Italian.

When it is not embodied into a precise type, this topos is developed through less explicit, but highly identifiable forms. One of the

⁸¹ Nesti, *I villaggi bruciano*, p. 37.

⁸² W. Nesti, 'Persio Nesti', in *Onde di terra: percorsi nel paesaggio letterario della Toscana*, 2 vols (Florence: Polistampa, 2002), II, p. 91. However, for previous formulations see Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?*, p. 48.

⁸³ Biasion, *Sagapò*, p. 70.

most recurrent ways in which the topos is articulated consists in describing the Italians in non-military fashions, while they undertake duties that can resemble activities of civilian life. For instance in 'L'obiettore di coscienza' in *Sagapò*, Italian soldiers are described while constructing a place of observation:

Al monte dei Mulini i soldati scavavano postazioni dall'alba al tramonto. Un lavoro estenuante, sotto il sole implacabile. Ma c'era la brezza del mare. Così, tra loro, non si chiamavano soldati ma operai.⁸⁴

In this excerpt the narrator deprives the soldiers of their military identity and confers on them the more irenic title of 'workman'. Similarly, in another passage of the book, in the short story 'Sagapò', the narrator claims that the troops that tidied up the camp 'non sembrava un esercito di soldati, ma di giardinieri'.⁸⁵

In the screenplay 'L'armata s'agapò', too, there are passages that insist on the unmilitary aspect of the Italian occupation forces. Renzi tells the story of a soldier who has to guard the young son of a Greek woman who became the lover of his Captain; given this duty he remarks that the man 'si tramutava in balia'.⁸⁶ Another battalion who takes up a series of agricultural activities is described as a group of farmers:

Amore a parte, l'atmosfera dei presidi era assai divertente. Per assicurare i viveri alla truppa si era diffusa l'usanza di coltivare orti e organizzare allevamenti di conigli [...] I comandanti di presidio si erano quindi trasformati in fattori di campagna, la

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 177.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 35.

⁸⁶ Renzi, 'L'armata s'agapò', in *Dall'Arcadia a Peschiera*, p. 37.

cui maggiore preoccupazione era la staccionata di un orto oppure la morte improvvisa di un coniglio.⁸⁷

This transformation into agricultural workers divests the Italians of a soldierly aspect and a belligerent attitude.

Other texts underline the unmilitary nature of the Italians by putting emphasis on characteristics of the soldiers that are reminiscent of the time before their conscription. For instance, in *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia* the troops that occupied Cephallonia are described as follows:

I soldati altro non erano che contadini in divisa, che sbadigliavano nei campicelli dell'isola; si vedevano, qua e là tra le vigne, muoversi con gli stessi lenti movimenti della Calabria o della Toscana, o di tutte le campagne di questo mondo. E gli ufficiali erano chiassosi studenti in vacanza, finalmente lontani dalle proprie mogli, venuti a giocare un gioco innocuo, in un'isola tutta per loro.⁸⁸

By presenting the soldiers as peasants and the officers as a group of innocuous students the narrator denies the martial nature of the Italian occupiers.

Such a depiction reappears later in the novel. In the dramatic hours following the 8th of September 1943, when the Italian division is about to be captured by the Germans, Aldo Puglisi desperately tries to convince his general of the necessity of fighting against the ex-allies. While doing so he states: 'i miei artiglieri da soli non bastano. Sono

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 37-38.

⁸⁸ Venturi, *Bandiera bianca* p. 39.

contadini signor generale [...] non sono artiglieri. Sono contadini travestiti da soldati'.⁸⁹

Similarly, in Pirro's *Jovanka e le altre* the narrator describes an unnamed Italian Lieutenant as: 'basso, rotondo, il tenente conservava, nonostante la divisa militare, il suo aspetto di medico condotto'.⁹⁰ In another passage, the narrator reports the comment of Velko, the captain of a Yugoslavian partisan squad that is responsible for an action against Italian soldiers, who states that: 'non è giusto che muoiano scannati contadini italiani vestiti da soldati'.⁹¹ All these passages underscore the supposed unmilitary nature of the Italians and, by doing so, they affirm their unwarlike character.

If one tries to develop an intentional reading of the aforementioned passages, and attempts to speculate what the authorial intention could have been in writing these scenes, it can be argued that the authors did not aim to depict the Italians as harmless soldiers.⁹² By insisting on the inadequate military appearance of the troopers, the writers denounce the weakness of the Italian army and its lack of preparation, which were direct consequences of Fascism's inadequacy. Similar representations contributed to denouncing the folly of the Fascist regime, which brought Italy into a war that the country was not ready and able to fight.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 157.

⁹⁰ Pirro, *Jovanka*, p. 40.

⁹¹ Ibid., 103.

⁹² On intentional reading see Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, pp. 102-103.

Moreover, especially in the quotes from Venturi and Pirro, two writers of well-known Left-wing sympathies, the insistence on the grassroots origins of the Italian soldiers — with references to humble working class professions — provides another possible ideological lens through which similar depictions can be read. Representations of Italians as working-class people who have been forced to dress up as soldiers by a military dictatorship brings forward a socialist interpretation of the war, as a struggle carried out by the poor who are sent to die in foreign lands by the political power that dominates society.

A passage from Pirro's *Le soldatesse* describing a Greek town under the control of the Italians supports this intentional reading:

I soldati, le ragazze e persino i carabinieri vivevano in amicizia: mancavano i sentimenti della guerra. In quella via non vi furono mai morti di fame. Fra quei civili ed i soldati panettieri esistevano altri rapporti. La guerra era sparita il giorno che per la prima volta accesero il forno.⁹³

In this excerpt the good relations between occupied and occupiers acquire the aspect of a socialist utopia. To the Italian soldiers, depicted as an embodiment of the working class — 'i soldati panettieri' — war offers the occasion for an encounter with another subdued population with whom, despite the tensions brought by the conflict, it is possible to build positive relations based on mutual support. In other words, Pirro might have conceived of this passage not as a realistic description of the occupation, but as an emblematic moment, showing the possibility of

⁹³ Pirro, *Le soldatesse*, pp. 83-84.

human cooperation, which mankind could try to achieve even in the midst of the violent divisions created by warfare.

Yet, regardless of the possible intentions that different writers may have had, all these passages create a depiction of the Italians as harmless and non-belligerent soldiers according to the topos of the Good Italian. This topos becomes particularly evident when relations between Italians and the occupied populations, and the ways the latter consider the former, are described.

For instance in *Jovanka e le altre*, the five Yugoslavian women who are the protagonists of the story are struck by the unwarlike appearance of the Italians, whom they see for the first time while the soldiers are resting and singing a song: 'per un attimo il canto le stordì, le disarmò, perché non era una canzone di guerra, vi era anzi nella voce dei granatieri una frivolezza e qualcosa di pacifico che intorpidiva e rendeva indolenti'.⁹⁴

In *I villaggi bruciano* the foreigners' recognition of the pacific nature of the Italians also characterises the encounter between Pompeo and the inhabitants of a Yugoslavian village. The latter welcome him with joy, pleased by the fact that the stranger is Italian:

Gli uomini circondarono Pompeo e quasi tutti gli chiesero se era Italiano: e si compiacevano della sua nazionalità e gli si mostravano amici come se lui avesse dovuto difenderli.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Pirro, *Jovanka*, p. 37.

⁹⁵ Nesti, *I villaggi bruciano*, p. 79.

This enthusiastic reaction is due to the supposedly humane behaviour that the Italians exhibited during the occupation.

Similar scenes, conveying the positive view that the occupied populations allegedly had of the Italian invaders, can be found in other texts of the corpus. In the short story 'Sagapò', after the 8th of September 1943, Greek people go on the street, paying their homage to the Italians who are about to be shipped to German POW camps:

La popolazione greca li salutava, essi rispondevano agitando le braccia. Le donne buttavano dell'uva oltre l'argine formato dalle sentinelle tedesche. [...] Alcune di esse piangevano [...] col pensiero che quegli uomini, che da oltre due anni frequentavano da amici le loro case, non li avrebbero più rivisti per tutta la vita.⁹⁶

Bedeschi's historical bestseller *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio* develops a similar depiction in even more pathetic and emphatic terms. When the Alpine divisions are going to leave Greece, in order to go back to Italy and prepare to approach the Russian front, locals are said to salute the departure as follows:

Si capiva, girando per il paese e parlando con la gente, quanto agli abitanti dispiaceva che gli alpini se ne andassero: ma nessuno supponeva che [...] la popolazione si sarebbe riversata sulle vie a dare l'ultimo saluto ai soldati. Invece successe proprio così, e più ancora: molti fra gli abitanti e fra questi moltissime ragazze accompagnarono i soldati per diversi chilometri salutandoli e allungando pacchetti di frutta secca [...] era un gran sventolare di fazzoletti con sgocciolare di lacrime.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Biasion, *Sagapò*, pp. 42-43.

⁹⁷ Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio* (Milan: Mursia, 1963; repr. 1994), p. 115.

In these blatantly exaggerated depictions the Italians are presented as admired people who managed to win the hearts of the Greeks, on the basis of their alleged good behaviour, in compliance with the topos of the Good soldier.

The presence of this topos in the writings of Bedeschi helps to understand some of the deep roots that this typified representation had in Italian culture. In fact, the protagonists of Bedeschi's books, similarly to those of Rigoni Stern, Revelli, and Cecovini, are not common soldiers, but a special force, namely the Alpine divisions. Since their creation in 1872, Alpine divisions have been at the centre of cultural transfigurations and have constituted what Marco Mondini has defined as the most powerful warrior myth of Italian culture.⁹⁸ Long-lasting traditions formed by songs, stories, and symbols flourished around this corps, engendering extremely typified characterisations of the men belonging to these units.

In cultural depictions Alpine troopers have been usually portrayed as stubborn, simple-minded men of few words, hard-drinkers, and hard-workers, characterised by a strong attachment to their platoon and to the mountains where many of them come from. They have been represented as restless, fatigueless, loyal, and brave warriors who, in spite of their sense of duty and exceptional war abilities, constitute quite an anarchist group that despises military rhetoric and hold in esteem only the authority of those who prove to deserve their respect. Moreover, whilst

⁹⁸ Mondini, *Alpini*, pp viii-x.

being extraordinary fighters, these soldiers are usually characterised by a kind-hearted and magnanimous nature.⁹⁹

The myth of the Alpine soldiers deeply affects the literature of the Axis War. Across the corpus several texts re-propose many elements that belong to Alpine imaginary — such as the celebration of the mountain communities and of the typical Alpine hat — and depict the Alpine soldiers as extremely skilful warriors, gifted with exceptional endurance, strength, and courage. Hence, in opposition to other narratives that focus on non-specialised units, those that deal with the Alpine soldiers represent the Italians as extremely capable fighters, who know well how to wage a war.¹⁰⁰

Moreover, in conformity with the cultural paradigm of the Alpine soldier, the literature of the Axis War also represents these men as goodhearted people, strengthening the topos of the Good Italian. Bedeschi's books in particular are full of extremely idealized representations. Among many, one can consider the following portrayal:

Nessuno più calmo, più benevolo, più sereno di loro. Andavano a prendere l'acqua, la lagna, tenevano pulite le bestie, si facevano il rancio, imbullettavano le loro scarpe che avevano perduto i chiodi nel lungo andare, erano sempre seguiti da

⁹⁹ This latter idea was already developed by the literature of World War I, which attributed to the Alpine soldiers a sense of fairness, and a love for peace. Under the Fascist regime this characterisation survived in parallel to representations that insisted more on the martial nature of the Alpine soldiers, see *Ibid.*, pp. 127-129.

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, the Alpine soldiers were not the only special units of the Italian army that went through processes of mythologisation in cultural depiction. Similar discursive practices surrounded, for instance, the paratroopers of the Folgore division. This seems to suggest a direct link between a strong sense of identity of a corps and its later appearance in cultural products and its survival in public memory. As an example of the celebrative narratives about the Folgore see Alberto Bechi Luserna, *I ragazzi della Folgore*, ed. by Paolo Caccia Dominioni (Milan: Alfieri, 1956).

frotte di ragazzini, naturali compagni coi quali dividere il pasto e il giuoco.¹⁰¹

The Alpine soldiers are presented as laborious men, devoted to all the characteristic activities of mountain-rural communities and with their reassuring aspects, attested by their positive relationship with the children, they appear as a perfect embodiment of the Good Italian.

The topos of the Good soldier can affect also scenes of combat. For instance in *Il sergente nella neve*, during a firefight with the Soviets on the rear-guard of the Stalingrad's siege, the Italians are shown to stop their fire once they realise that the enemies are trying to rescue the wounded:

Riprendiamo a sparare. Solo che questa volta non vengono per ammazzarci: vogliono solo raccogliere i feriti rimasti sul fiume. Non sparo più, allora. Grido: 'Non sparate! Raccolgono i feriti; non sparate!' Si stupirono i russi a non sentire più le pallottole che li cercavano: si fermarono increduli, si alzarono in piedi, si guardarono attorno. Gridai: 'Non sparate!'. Raccolsero in fretta i loro compagni e li caricarono sulle slitte.¹⁰²

In this scene and in others across the corpus the Italians are presented as capable of fighting only as long as they perceive a direct threat against their lives. This representation constructs the idea of the Axis War as a fair war, carried out with humanity, by troops who respected the enemy and who were therefore immune from the cult of violence that was fostered by Fascist culture.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. 94.

¹⁰² Rigoni Stern, *Il sergente nella neve* (Turin: Einaudi, 1953; repr. 1990), p. 41.

¹⁰³ This way of recounting the war does not constitute a peculiarity of the Italian texts, but also shaped, for instance, the memory of the war developed in Germany by many soldiers who fought in the Wehrmacht, see Corni, *Raccontare la guerra*, p. 11; G. Cinelli, 'La questione della colpa: memorialistica tedesca e campagna di Russia', in Q. Antonelli,

The topos of the Good Italian has been so powerful in shaping the representation of the Axis War that it can be found even in a text such as *La casa di Novach*, which, as will be shown later, is one of the few that openly address the Italian use of violence. In a passage of the text a Slovenian man is blocked and detained by the Italians after he refuses to perform the Fascist Roman salute while passing at a check-point. The Lieutenant who commands the arrest decides to punish and humiliate him and he orders his men to slap the prisoner one by one. The soldiers, however, do not comply with the order:

'Dai Levis, tocca a te.' Levis si mosse. Si avvicinò al ragazzo con risolutezza, fece il gesto di colpirlo forte, poi contenne la foga del braccio: non lo schiaffeggiò: gli posò appena la mano sulla guancia. [...] Furegato si avvicinò al ragazzo: fece anch'esso il gesto di picchiare forte, ma non picchiò più forte di Levis. [...] Poi fu la volta di Libergolis, di Valenti, di Brum.¹⁰⁴

All the soldiers refuse to use violence against the Slovenian, and by doing so they convey the idea of the non-violent nature of the Italians. Even a moment that is supposed to reveal the repressive behaviour that the Italians had during the occupation becomes an occasion to show their alleged good nature.

The examples considered show that across the corpus the topos of the Good soldier alternates between two forms. The first develops a representation of the Italians as people who are characterised by an unmilitary nature and hence are not made for fighting a war; the second,

ed., *La propaganda è l'unica nostra cultura: scritture autobiografiche dal fronte sovietico 1941-1943* (Trento: Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino, 2016), p. 283.

¹⁰⁴ Terrosi, *La casa di Novach*, p. 47.

embodied mainly in the figures of the Alpine troopers, represents the Italians as skilled and capable soldiers who are nevertheless characterised by a goodhearted nature. In both cases the Italians are presented as averse to violence and devoid of the brutality that affects people in the midst of a battle.

3.4 The Difference between the Italians and the Germans

So far the analysis of the topos of the Good Italian has overlooked an extremely important element, which is the fact that this motif is often developed in a comparative manner. Although in many cases the depiction of the Italians as goodhearted and harmless people stands alone without a comparison with any other populations, there are many cases in which this topos is coupled with another motif, regarding the evilness of the Germans.

A straightforward example of this contrasting pair can be found in *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia*. Years after the end of the war, the son of the sergeant Aldo Puglisi arrives in Cephalonia where he meets an old waiter who tells him in broken Italian:

‘A me piace italiani’ aveva detto il cameriere ridendo; [...] ‘Io conosciuto italiani’ aveva detto ancora. E dopo una pausa incerta aveva aggiunto: ‘Italiani, buoni. Tedeschi, cattivi’.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Venturi, *Bandiera bianca*, p. 43.

In the unambiguous summation of the Greek waiter readers encounter two of the most consistent representations of the texts of the Axis War, which insist on the goodness of the Italians while portraying the Germans as evil.

Across the corpus German characters are often represented in accordance with a preconceived type that Rosario Forlenza has called 'the evil' or 'the wicked'.¹⁰⁶ This typified representation is often the result of dehumanisation processes, which portray the Germans as monstrous and non-human figures. An example of this depiction is offered by the description of an SS officer in *I villaggi bruciano*: 'un essere magro e nervoso, pallidissimo, glabro sfregiato di una cicatrice che da un occhio gli arrivava all'angolo della bocca'.¹⁰⁷

Such characterisation often relies on the use of animal metaphors and similes, which contribute to the process of dehumanisation. For instance in *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia* the first appearance of the Germans is represented as follows:

I tedeschi passarono rapidissimi dinanzi la Villetta. Sulla macchina mimetizzata, color giallo e marrone e verde, che somigliava a un mostruoso rospo di campo, sedevano quattro ufficiali. Erano tutti e quattro biondi; Adriana credette di vedere il loro sguardo, l'azzurro e freddo loro sguardo tedesco.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ See Forlenza, 'Sacrificial Memory', *History and Memory*, p. 83.

¹⁰⁷ Nesti, *I Villaggi bruciano*, p. 221. Although in this and other examples this type is used for the portrayal of a Nazi officer, the texts of the main corpus make no significant distinction between the Nazis and the German people. The only text that mentions the necessity of this difference is Preti, *Giovinezza*, p. 343.

¹⁰⁸ Venturi, *Bandiera bianca*, p. 64.

In the passage a simile concerning a monstrous toad is used to describe the officers' car and, through metonymy, conveys the idea of the monstrosity and animalistic nature of the Germans, which is reaffirmed by the remark about their eyes.

A writer that makes extensive use of animal metaphors in his war narratives is Malaparte. In *Kaputt* images of animals are a constant presence and they are charged with rich and manifold meanings that change according to the context.¹⁰⁹ However, the animal symbols used in the depiction of the Germans align with the overall process of their demonization. One can consider, for instance, the following portrait of SS General Joseph Dietrich:

Ero stato certamente attratto dal suo viso pallido, dai suoi occhi incredibilmente freddi, dalle sue orecchie enormi, dalla sua piccola bocca di pesce. Dietrich si era messo a ridere [...] E rideva spalancando la piccola bocca di pesce dal palato roseo, mostrando i denti di pesce fitti e aguzzi.¹¹⁰

This description transmutes Dietrich in a figure reminiscent of a shark, conveying the idea of his ferocity and cruelty.

It is important to stress that this way of representing the Germans is not peculiar to the Italian literature of the Axis War.¹¹¹ Just within the perimeter of Italian culture, it must be noted that negative characterisations of the Germans had already been developed at the time

¹⁰⁹ A. Orsucci, *Il 'giocoliere d'idee': Malaparte e la filosofia* (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2015), pp. 164-166.

¹¹⁰ Malaparte, *Kaputt* (Naples: Casella, 1944); repr. in Malaparte, *Curzio Malaparte: opere scelte*, ed. by L. Martellini (Milan: Mondadori, 2009), p. 446.

¹¹¹ The idea of German evilness had not been a peculiarity of Italian culture either; instead it has represented a common trait of the vast majority of the memory narratives developed across Europe at the end of World War II, Judt, 'The Past is Another Country', *The Politics of Retribution*, p. 296.

of the First World War.¹¹² This cultural baggage was then re-used during the Italian Civil War to promote the continuation of the war against Germany, which was presented as the natural enemy of the Italian nation.¹¹³

As a result, negative depictions of the Germans have circulated across various vectors of memory of World War II and can be found in many literary works devoted to the Italian Civil War.¹¹⁴ As an example one can consider the representation of the Lieutenant Hans, the German who reaches Fondi, in *La ciociara*:

Questo Hans era un uomo piccoletto, biondiccio, coi fianchi larghi come quelli di una donna, la faccia bianca e un po' gonfia. Aveva due o tre grandi cicatrici attraverso la guancia [...] quella sua faccia molle e non del tutto rotonda ma come ammaccata pareva proprio una di quelle pesche o mele cadute dall'albero in terra che, cadendo, rimangono tutte ammaccate e tagliuzzate e poi quando vai a spaccarle vedi che dentro sono mezze marce.¹¹⁵

This portrait attributes to the German an ambiguous masculinity and a repugnant look, and by doing so suggests the idea of his degenerate morality and evilness.¹¹⁶

Fussell has shown that processes of dehumanization are common features of war literature, in which the enemy often 'took on attributes of the monstrous and grotesque' and is said to resemble 'the vilest

¹¹² Collotti, 'I tedeschi', in *I luoghi della memoria: personaggi e date dell'Italia unita* (Rome; Bari: Laterza, 1997), pp. 72-75.

¹¹³ Forlenza, 'Sacrificial Memory', *History and Memory*, p. 83.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 83; Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir*, p. 228.

¹¹⁵ Moravia, *La ciociara*, p. 114.

¹¹⁶ Ambiguous masculinity and perverted sexuality are characteristics that have often been deployed in the representations of Nazis and Fascists, especially in Italian cinema, see D. Forgacs 'Days of Sodom: The Fascism-Perversion Equation in Films of 1960s and 1970s', in *Italian Fascism*, pp. 216-236.

animals'.¹¹⁷ The literature of the Axis War, taking up the Antifascist perspective that shaped the memory discourse of the postwar years, considered the Germans as the real enemy of the Italians, and constantly portrayed them as evil figures according to the motif of the wicked.

This resulted in the creation of a consistent and recurrent topos which, rather than the mere representation of the evilness of the Germans, consists in the regular differentiation and opposition between them and the Italians, who are generally portrayed according to the topos of the Good soldier.

The texts of the main corpus establish this differentiation through a series of different strategies. For instance in an episode of *I più non ritornano* the autodiegetic narrator sends some soldiers to look for food in a Russian village; the men find a cow that they decide to take, kill, and butcher; however this mission ends up in a failure:

I soldati incaricati di macellare e cucinare la mucca tornarono dopo un certo tempo a mani vuote e riferirono d'essere stati derubati dell'animale già ridotto in pezzi, da tedeschi e connazionali: prepotenti i primi, affamati i secondi.¹¹⁸

While the narrator displays understanding of the reasons of his countrymen, who must have stolen the food because of their hunger, the same form of empathy is denied to the Germans, who are presented as driven by an evil will. Through these double standards the text creates a differentiation between the Italians and the Germans.

¹¹⁷ Fussell, *The Great War*, p. 77.

¹¹⁸ Corti, *I più non ritornano*, p. 128.

Similarly in *I villaggi bruciano*, when Pompeo ends up with a group of partisans belonging to Tito's formations, he discovers that in the squad there is also a German doctor who has deserted. The doctor is a staunch socialist and feels at ease among the Communist partisans. Unfortunately, the latter do not trust him because of his national origin, and, despite his commitment, they decide to kill him.¹¹⁹ By contrast, no one questions the good faith of Pompeo who, simply because he is Italian, is welcomed in the squad and, in spite of the fact that he does not have any political beliefs, is allowed to become a partisan.

Other examples of this process of differentiation can be found in Revelli's *La guerra dei poveri*. During the retreat from the Eastern front the autodiegetic narrator describes the Germans as merciless and cruel when they maliciously move Italian soldiers — even those who are wounded — out from a Russian house, in order to take their place and spend the night in a shelter. This act raises Revelli's outrage:

Questi tedeschi della malora [...] stanno buttando fuori dalle isbe i soldati italiani: se li passano come sacchi, anche i feriti, anche i congelati, proprio tutti, sghignazzano. Porci, porci, cani vigliacchi.¹²⁰

A few pages later, though, the same scene happens again, but with reversed roles. The Germans are ejected, regardless of the fact that some of them are wounded and frozen:

Decidiamo di far sgomberare un'isba occupata da alcuni tedeschi congelati. Fanno i furbi, non vorrebbero uscire.

¹¹⁹ Nesti, *I villaggi bruciano*, pp. 64-69.

¹²⁰ Revelli, *La guerra dei poveri* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962; repr. 2014), p. 91.

Adottiamo i loro sistemi, li buttiamo fuori di brutto, a pedate.¹²¹

This time the narrator presents the Germans' resistance as a sort of sly cunningness and the Italians' decision simply as a reaction against previous Germans misbehaviour.

In other texts the sense of the difference between the Italians and the Germans is constructed by representing harsh fights taking place between soldiers of the two groups. For instance in Fusco's *Guerra d'Albania* the narrator recounts an episode around the end of the Greek campaign that has as a protagonist a private, the soldier Sanna:

Un richiamato sardo del '12, certo Sanna, alto appena da non essere riformato, quasi più largo che lungo, dalle sopracciglia d'ebano confuse con l'attaccatura dei capelli, si staccò un momento dalla colonna in marcia, per dare mezza pagnotta a due bambini seminudi, dagli occhi pieni di spavento.¹²²

Given his physical appearance the man does not seem fit for fighting and constitutes, thus, a perfect embodiment of the Good Italian, as his act of generosity toward the children shows. This gesture, however, is not appreciated by a German, 'un tedesco', who tells Sanna off and then pushes the piece of bread from the hands of the two children onto the ground.¹²³ The difference between the generosity of the Italian and the wickedness of the German is strengthened by the sudden violent reaction of the former:

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 95.

¹²² Fusco, *Guerra d'Albania* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1961), p. 93.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 93.

Quindi lo si vide arrampicarsi al tedesco, come ad un olmo, stringergli il collo con le braccia, e la vita con le gambe, frantumargli letteralmente la faccia con una tremenda serie di testate. [...] Il sardo non mollò la presa. Gli restò abbrancato, a cavalcioni, anche per terra, continuando a demolirgli furiosamente il naso, le labbra e le sopracciglia.¹²⁴

This paroxysmal reaction constitutes one of the most violent outbursts of an Italian character in the literature of the Axis War and conveys the sense of the strong opposition that divides the two allies.

While discussing *I lunghi fucili*, the memoir on the Russian retreat by Cristoforo Moscioni Negri, Mondini suggests that some of the conflicts between the Germans and the Italians that this text reports give the impression of possessing an almost symbolic meaning.¹²⁵ It seems right to extend Mondini's suggestion to other works comprising the literature of the Axis War. Despite possible historical evidence that can be used to back up similar incidents between the Italians and the Germans, the continuous opposition of the two, on which many authors of the main corpus insist, goes beyond the retelling of specific episodes. Similar passages contribute rather to creating a thorough breach between the two national groups and, in this way, differentiating the Italians from their allies in the Axis War.¹²⁶

Interestingly, the texts that present the strongest anti-German stance, reporting cases of open brawls between the two allies, are those by Revelli and Corti, set during the retreat from Russia. It is indubitable

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 94.

¹²⁵ Mondini, *Alpini*, p. 182.

¹²⁶ On historical cases of bad relationships between the two allies see Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, pp. 394-395.

that this terrible experience, during which thousands of soldiers strove to survive across the steppe in the middle of the Russian winter, offered several episodes of poor cooperation between people of different nationalities. However, it appears significant that these two authors, once they returned to Italy, fought against the Germans during the Italian Civil War. It seems possible, thus, that this experience contributed to forming an utterly negative view of the Germans that retrospectively influenced the ways in which these men narrated their experience in the Russian campaigns. As Arnold Harvey has noted in his study of war narratives, 'hindsight inevitably coloured even writing that purported to be honest reportage'.¹²⁷

As an indirect proof of this, one can consider the fact that in the writings of Rigoni Stern — who was in a POW camp during the Italian Civil War — the Germans are not described positively, but it is not possible to find the same sense of enmity that characterises the writings of Corti and Revelli and no cases of open clashes are reported. Brawls between the Germans and the Italians are completely absent also from the books of Bedeschi, who took part into the Italian Civil War, but on the side of the Fascist RSI.¹²⁸ In other words, the authors' ideological convictions and experiences in the Italian Civil War seem to play a crucial role in the

¹²⁷ A. D. Harvey, *A Muse of Fire: Literature, Art, and War* (London; Rio Grande: The Hambledon Press, 1998), p. 137.

¹²⁸ See B. Gramola, *La venticinquesima brigata nera «A. Capanni» e il suo comandante Giulio Bedeschi: storia di una ricerca* (Sommacampagna: Cierre, 2005).

ways in which the experience on the Russian front has been narrativised in their books.¹²⁹

Yet, the variations in the ways the Germans are portrayed across the corpus are only a matter of degrees and shades; in all the texts in which they appear they are depicted in a negative manner and they are always presented as a group from which the Italians drastically differ. Even in *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio*, a text which is not characterised by a sense of hatred towards the Germans, the two allies are clearly distinguished: as the narrator points out ‘i tedeschi erano incomprensibili per gli uomini’ of the Italian battalions.¹³⁰

In this process of differentiation several texts also deploy the topos of the Sagapò army. For instance, in Pirro’s *Le soldatesse* the clashes between the national groups are not limited to the troops, but are said to happen also among the respective prostitutes:

Quel giorno stesso un vecchio sergente di carriera, mentre mi indicava il ‘Vaterland’, mi raccontò delle terribili lotte che si svolgevano fra le puttane degli italiani e quelle dei tedeschi. Il ‘Vaterland’ era un tabarin riservato alle forze di occupazione. Era l’unico luogo di Atene dove era possibile vedere, relativamente vicini, italiani e tedeschi. Le serate cominciavano sempre in un’atmosfera cameratesca, ma spesso finiva a pugni e così succedeva anche fuori, fra le puttane dei tedeschi e le nostre.¹³¹

This passage enlarges the conflict between the Germans and the Italians to an inescapable opposition that is even re-enacted by the prostitutes.

¹²⁹ On this see Mondini’s reflections on Revelli, Mondini, *Alpini*, p. 186.

¹³⁰ Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. 159.

¹³¹ Pirro, *Le soldatesse*, p. 23.

Yet, the main way in which the two topoi are combined relates to the allegedly different nature of the two populations as concerns their ways of loving and making love. In *Sagapò* when Ketty, the young prostitute known as Sagapò, goes to work in a German brothel she immediately notices a profound difference in the way her new clients treat her:

Nessun soldato aveva più inciso il suo nome sui muri della casa, nessuna canzone era più stata fatta per lei, nessuno le aveva più scritto quelle lettere composte con lunga pazienza nel tedio della vita sotto la tenda. E nessuno l'aveva più guardata con occhi d'affamato, brillanti di desiderio e di ammirazione, aspettando per delle ore che a lei piacesse di spogliarsi. Questi Tedeschi non avevano sangue nelle vene, la loro maniera d'amare era fredda e distante. Si eccitavano soltanto quando avevano bevuto.¹³²

While the Italians are presented, in accordance with the stereotype of the Latin Lover, as romantic, skilful, and caring towards the women, the Germans are portrayed as incapable of being good lovers.

An alleged lack of passion of the Germans is reported also by *Le soldatesse*, in which the narrator claims that 'i tedeschi non cercavano mai le donne con la nostra stessa foga, erano educati ed ambigui'.¹³³ In this passage the Germans are characterised by an equivocal masculinity, which, through a contrast, reaffirms the performative virility of the Italians.

Later in the story the protagonist and the group of prostitutes he travels with end up in a German van. One of the girls, Tula, is forced to sit

¹³² Biasion, *Sagapò*, p. 44.

¹³³ Pirro, *Le soldatesse*, p. 23.

next to two Germans. This episode becomes an occasion to underline, implicitly, the difference between the two national groups:

Poi udimmo Tula gridare, l'ufficiale tedesco cercava di spogliarla. Tula chiedeva aiuto in italiano perché sperava in me [...] i due tedeschi, urlando, le strappavano vesti e capelli, le schiaffeggiavano il viso e le gambe.¹³⁴

In their brief appearance, the Germans immediately show in their approach to the woman a level of violence and ferocity that is unknown to the Italians.¹³⁵

This latter differentiation, revolving around the use of violence against women, is also at the centre of Silori's short story 'La casa di Atene'. The young Italian protagonist is forced by the circumstances to spend two nights in a brothel in Athens, open only to Italian troopers. The man is quite ashamed of his new accommodation and he does not want to sleep with one of the girls without creating a sense of personal intimacy with her. During his stay, though, two German soldiers decide to pay a sudden visit to the place. The two are drunk and violent, they frighten the girls, and they are finally kicked out of the building thanks to the help of the protagonist.¹³⁶ The gentle nature of the Italian protagonist contrasts with the violent behaviour of the Germans.

Violence, indeed, constitutes the most important issue around which the topos of the difference between the Germans and the Italians is

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 119.

¹³⁵ Pirro's *Le soldatesse* is one of the few texts that show the Italians mistreating local women, as will be discussed in the Epilogue. However, it does not attribute to the Italians a conduct as violent as that ascribed to the Germans in this scene.

¹³⁶ Silori, 'Le "case chiuse" di guerra', in *Quando l'Italia tollerava*, pp. 259-260.

developed. In all the narratives in which the Germans appear, the narrators place strong emphasis on the violence they use. For instance, in the short story 'Katina', in *Sagapò*, German paratroopers, 'rassomiglianti a guerrieri medievali' are described when conquering the Greek city of Heraklion on the Island of Crete: 'allora quegli uomini si sparpagliarono fra le rovine lanciando le bombe, freddando chi capitava sottomano'.¹³⁷ It is only after this moment of violence that Italian soldiers enter into the scene, represented by the officer Lo Guercio:

Circa quattro mesi dopo i bombardamenti di Iraclion, il mio plotone, allora comandato dal maresciallo Lo Guercio, un piccolo grasso maresciallo che pareva ricavato dal centro di un cocomero, fu mandato al caposaldo.¹³⁸

By juxtaposing German violence with the type of the Italian inoffensive soldier, the text creates an opposition between the two people.

Similarly, in *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio* the narrator reports an episode that causes outraged reactions among the Italian contingent. An old man and his young niece had a scuffle with a German soldier after the woman had tried to protect him from the soldier's violent behaviour. The German authorities decided to punish the two Russians who, the day after, are hanged from a tree in the village's main square.¹³⁹ After this scene that casts light on the brutal German repression of the occupied population, the narrator moves on to describe the sympathetic way in

¹³⁷ Biasion, *Sagapò*, p. 67.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 68.

¹³⁹ Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, pp. 159-160.

which the Alpine soldiers treat the POWs.¹⁴⁰ In this way the passage establishes once again a distinction between the two allies.

Among all the texts of the corpus the one that emphasises German violence the most is Corti's *I più non ritornano*, which reports many war crimes committed on the Eastern Front. In one scene the Germans are described as carrying out a massacre of prisoners, including those captured by the Italians;¹⁴¹ in another passage they are said to have killed a small group of partisan prisoners by setting them on fire.¹⁴²

The most disturbing episode is reported by an intradiegetic narrator. The Italian soldier happened to find shelter in a Russian house together with a German. The latter forced all the inhabitants to move out of the house and killed them all in the barnyard, sparing only a young woman whom he repeatedly raped during the night:

Rientrato, aveva buttato la giovane sul letto e l'aveva violentata, invitando l'italiano a fare altrettanto. Il nostro soldato aveva risposto con un gesto di diniego: desiderava solo rimanere nella casa al caldo. Il tedesco [...] la mattina dopo l'aveva cacciata di casa: appena essa era stata oltre la soglia, l'aveva abbattuta con un improvviso colpo di pistola-mitragliatrice.¹⁴³

In this scene the Italian soldier, whilst not attempting to stop the ally, equally does not engage in any form of violence and remains a passive observer. Even in this case the weakness and decency of the Italian are opposed to German brutality.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 160.

¹⁴¹ Corti, *I più non ritornano*, p. 112.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 149.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 150.

Throughout the corpus different authors return to a Manichean oppositional dualism in order to create a clear distinction between the Germans and the Italians. By resorting to the types of the good Italian and the evil German, by adopting double standards in the ways events are narrated, by reporting cases of open fights between soldiers of the two armies, by differentiating in the ways they approach women, and by focusing on the violence of the former and on the humanity of the latter, the texts create a constant distinction between the Germans and the Italians.

3.5 The Difference between the Italians and the Fascists

The texts of the main corpus present another topos that is based on a process of differentiation, which concerns, this time, the difference between the Italians and the Fascists. Compared to the other topoi, this is the one that presents the smallest number of occurrences across the corpus. This fact, however, does not mean that certain narratives develop different and more nuanced representations of the relationship between the Italians and the Fascists. By contrast, if in several texts this topos does not appear it is due to the fact that these narratives do not offer any depictions of Fascism at all.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ For instance in novels such as *Il sergente nella neve* and *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio* there are no occurrences of the words 'Fascismo' or 'Fascista'.

The absence of any reference to the political dictatorship that had ruled Italy for twenty years and brought the country into the Axis War appears extremely relevant. This significant omission should be seen both as a sign of the difficulty that in the postwar years many writers had in addressing the legacy of the dictatorship and as a proof of the process of de-fascistisation that affected the memory narratives of the Axis War.¹⁴⁵

If one sets aside those narratives that do not develop any relevant depiction of Fascism, the other texts of the literature of the Axis War offer a consistent depiction of Fascist characters, as a group of people from which the other Italians can be clearly distinguished. This difference can be easily spotted, for instance, in the description that Cecovini develops of a group of Fascist Black-Shirts:

Da un'altra tradotta scendevano gli uomini di un battaglione di camicie nere. Erano piccoli e svelti e i loro ufficiali lanciavano rapidi comandi ai quali rispondevano scatti a battute di tacchi. Al confronto i nostri montagnini grossi e lenti sembravano pachidermi.¹⁴⁶

The Fascist soldiers are characterised by common physical traits and they all move at a fast pace which conveys the sense of a narrow-minded respect for military formalities. To these men Cecovini opposes the Alpine soldiers who, with their size and slowness, seem to belong to a different anthropological group.

The Alpine soldiers in particular are often opposed to Mussolini's supporters. In *Quota Albania* Rigoni Stern decided to fill the gap that some

¹⁴⁵ On the process of de-fascistisation see Chapter Two, note 39.

¹⁴⁶ M. Cecovini, *Ritorno da Poggio Boschetto* (Florence, La Voce, 1954), p. 213.

critics found in his first book, which did not address the presence of the Fascists in the Italian army and, therefore, did not develop an explicit and outspoken condemnation of the dictatorship.¹⁴⁷ In this text, thus, readers find several Fascist soldiers, who, from their first appearance, look extremely different from the Alpine troopers:

Arrivò la comunicazione che delle camicie nere erano in marcia verso di noi. Il colonnello mi mandò a chiamare perché andassi loro incontro e facessi da guida: nevicava fitto, e, disse, c'era il pericolo che si perdessero. Presi con me Agnoli e fu un camminare balordo perché i militi si sparpagliavano in gruppi quant'era lunga la mulattiera: avevano anche buona volontà, ma proprio non ce la facevano.¹⁴⁸

The Black-Shirts are unable to follow their more experienced guides through the blizzard, a fact that shows their lack of skills and training in comparison with the expert Alpine soldiers. A few pages later, the text offers further proof of their incompetence:

A guardarli, con quella montatura irrazionale, e ridicola, facevano pena [...] arrancavano nella neve con fiato grosso e bolso [...] Santini e io facevamo come i cani da pastore che tengono in branco le pecore: si stimolava e si punzecchiava; si aiutava, anche, i più malandati a portare i fagotti e le armi. [...] Per più giorni, quando percorrevamo quella pista, trovavamo oggetti abbandonati dalle camicie nere.¹⁴⁹

In this scene the clumsiness and inability of the Fascists are revealed and create a sharp distinction between them and the skilled Alpine servicemen.

¹⁴⁷ For the criticism of disengagement moved to Rigoni's *Il sergente nella neve* see Motta, *Mario Rigoni Stern* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1983), p. 72; M. Buzzi, *Invito alla lettura di Mario Rigoni Stern* (Milan: Mursia, 1985), p. 42.

¹⁴⁸ Rigoni Stern, *Quota Albania* (Turin: Einaudi, 1971; repr. 2003), p. 88.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

A similar distinction is constructed by Revelli in *La guerra dei poveri*. During an attack the autodiegetic narrator highlights the fearfulness that characterises the Black-Shirts, who are not able to tell the direction from which the gunfire is coming:

Una nostra batteria anticarro apre il fuoco alle spalle. I soliti 'squadristi', credendoli colpi in arrivo, si tuffano. I più fifoni si trincerano addirittura dietro le slitte, o scavano buchette nella neve come i tedeschi.¹⁵⁰

In Revelli's depiction the Fascists are characterised by a poor propensity for fighting and a tendency to be easily scared. Similar features are reported by Rigoni Stern as well who, in *Quota Albania*, represents the Fascists abandoning the battlefield in terror:

I Greci arrivarono sotto le postazioni delle camicie nere, e queste, senza nemmeno tentare un lancio di bombe a mano per fermarli, abbandonarono tutto e fuggirono come lepri davanti ai segugi. Scapparono nella Valle del Verces; ma il bello è che non si fermarono una volta giunti lontani dal combattimento: proseguirono fino al comando di divisione, dove, vedendoli in questo stato, credettero che i Greci fossero alle calcagna e caricarono muli e carrette per ritirarsi verso Elbasan. La situazione si era fatta preoccupante, ma gli alpini resistevano con rabbia.¹⁵¹

The uncontrolled flight generates a grotesque chain-reaction, whose excessiveness gives to the passage an almost comic tone. Even in this scene the representation of the cowardice of the Fascists is contrasted with the bravery of the Alpine soldiers, who do not abandon their positions and daringly fight back.

¹⁵⁰ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 54.

¹⁵¹ Rigoni, *Quota Albania*, pp. 97-98.

Similarly to the topos of the difference between the Italians and the Germans, the distinction between the Italians and the Fascists also finds embodiment in a series of open brawls and fights that divide members of the two groups. In *Quota Albania*, after the Alpine soldiers have rejected the enemies' attack, the autodiegetic narrator describes an outraged Alpine colonel, furious at the insufficient support that his elite troops received from the rest of the army. On his way to headquarters, the man sees two Black-Shirts who, during the attack, abandoned their position and vents his anger on them: as the narrator reports, 'si sfogò a bastonarle'.¹⁵²

In *Ritorno da Poggio Boschetto*, during a stay in Bari, before the departure to the Greek front, the Alpine battalion of the protagonist has to spend a night in a dormitory next to a group of Fascist Black-Shirts. The Alpine soldiers are particularly tired, since they spent the evening at the local hospital, visiting the wounded and they are still shaken by what they saw there — 'avevo ancora negli occhi l'immagine del piede cancrenoso d'un alpino'.¹⁵³ In this state of mind they found the vulgar laughter and noise coming from the room of the Fascists unacceptable. After an initially moderate protest, the situation escalates in a harsh altercation. This episode communicates that an insurmountable distinction separates the Alpine soldiers, who are concerned about the suffering of the Italian people, and the vulgar Fascists, resulting in an unavoidable scuffle between the two.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 100.

¹⁵³ Cecovini, *Poggio Boschetto*, p. 223.

The sense of opposition between the Italians and the Fascists also emerges in a scene of *Giovinezza*, *Giovinezza* in which a Black-Shirt, who openly supports the Axis War and the regime's propaganda, is roughly criticised and confronted by the rest of the Italian troopers:

Una camicia nere ripeteva, come un disco consunto di fonografo, la parola d'ordine della retorica fascista: 'Vinceremo'. Rispondevano grugniti, risate amare, lazzi ironici. Ma il milite continuava. Un tenente, con una coscia fasciata, sanguinante, gridò: 'Taci, imbecille!'. Un grosso alpino, di scatto, gli allungò un poderoso calcio nel sedere. Solo allora la camicia nera si decise a tacere.¹⁵⁴

The passage is charged with a series of symbolic meanings, unfolding in a climax. The angry grunts and ironic laughs that come from the mass of unnamed soldiers appear as a proof of the firm disaffection that the Italians felt towards the war and the regime; the wounded Lieutenant stands for the disdain of the veterans for Fascism; finally, the scene is closed by the appearance of an Alpine soldier who physically castigates and silences the Black-Shirt.

Mondini has shown that throughout Italian national history the figure of the Alpine soldier has been used as the embodiment of 'la comunità in armi', offering an ideal representation of the virtues of the national community.¹⁵⁵ The Alpine soldiers who appear in these episodes conform to this function. These men are characterised by an irremediable incompatibility with the Fascists and, in this way, they testify to the

¹⁵⁴ Preti, *Giovinezza*, p. 251

¹⁵⁵ Mondini, *Alpini*, pp. ix, xii.

enmity that the Italians allegedly felt for the regime and symbolise the detachment of the former from the latter.

Yet, as has been observed for the previous topos, the clearest demarcation between the Italians and the Fascists stems from representations of violence. In fact, some texts report acts of violence that are specifically attributed to the Fascist segment of the Italian army. For instance in *I villaggi bruciano*, a Yugoslavian partisan of the squad that Pompeo has joined, describes a heinous act of violence committed by the Black-Shirts:

Voi sapere bene, compagni, quali sono le atrocità commesse dai fascisti. Noi avevamo casa e famiglia: nessuna ambizione era in noi: soltanto lavorare si voleva noi. Ed ecco venire i fascisti. Hanno ucciso gli uomini, saccheggiato ed arso le case, violentato le nostre donne...¹⁵⁶

Here the repressive violence of the Italian occupation is revealed, but the agency and responsibility for such repressive action are entirely ascribed to the Fascists, contributing to strengthening the difference between them and the other Italians, who, through the figure of Pompeo, are portrayed according to the topos of the Good soldier.

In a passage of Fusco's *Guerra d'Albania*, too, the link between Fascism and violence is openly used to point to this difference. The narrator reports that after the invasion of Greece:

Mentre i battaglioni 'M' della milizia volontaria, e alcuni reparti nazisti mandati a dar loro manforte, rastrellavano i monti, bruciavano i casolari, fucilavano 'sul posto' e seviziavano gli

¹⁵⁶ Nesti, *I villaggi bruciano*, p. 67.

inermi, i reparti regolari del nostro esercito [...] si guardavano bene dal partecipare seriamente alla repressione.¹⁵⁷

In this excerpt the Fascists and the Germans, who are associated by the use of violence, are opposed to the innocuous Italian soldiers, who do not participate in the acts of repression. In this way the text both re-affirms the idea of the non-violent nature of the Italians and creates a distinction between them and the Fascists.

Given these cases in which the violence of the war is attributed exclusively to the Fascists, it does not seem coincidental that in *I più non ritornano*, in a passage that puts an Italian soldier in close proximity to violence, Corti resorts to the figure of a Fascist Black-Shirt:

Anche qui era passato l'attacco alla baionetta: in diversi luoghi i cadaveri russi giacevano frammisti a [...] gruppetti d'italiani falciati mentre si lanciavano all'attacco. Qualcuno con la baionetta inastata. Ricordo una camicia nera che giaceva al suolo sopra il suo moschetto dalla baionetta inastata, il viso contro la neve, ma disposto in modo che lo si poteva vedere. Nella disumanità indicibile di quel tramonto, quel soldato, che pure doveva essere stato terribile nell'assalto, aveva perso ogni terribilità.¹⁵⁸

This excerpt highlights that death is able to give back a degree of humanity even to the most ferocious man, as in the case of this Italian who, before meeting his death, was taking part in close combat with a bayonet. However, in order to make this point — which has to acknowledge the fact that men at war are dominated by violence and wildness — Corti decides to use a Fascist Black-Shirt. In this way the

¹⁵⁷ Fusco, *Guerra d'Albania*, p. 110.

¹⁵⁸ E. Corti, *I più non ritornano: diario di ventotto giorni d'accerchiamento russo nell'inverno 1942-43* (Milan: Garzanti, 1947; repr. Milan: Ares, 2013), p. 111.

passage associates the latter, rather than a common Italian soldier, to this implicit moment of violence.

Throughout the corpus the texts that do not avoid portraying Fascist characters depict them in a consistent way, as a group to which the other Italians can be easily opposed. Besides representations of open scuffles between the two, the narratives deploy two main strategies to create this distinction. The texts that have Alpine soldiers as main characters insist on the Fascists' weak temper, on their cowardice, and on their lack of military capacity. The others, instead, focus on the Fascists' use of violence, which is presented as a specific trait of their.

These two strategies are merged together in Fusco's *Le rose del ventennio*, in the character of Ferro Maria Ferri, the voluntary Fascist Lieutenant who is the protagonist of the last chapter of the book. The man, who is often described through animal metaphors that illustrate the process of dehumanization already seen in the depiction of the Germans, is initially presented as a ferocious warrior who respects a strict discipline that is unknown to the other soldiers of the Italian army.¹⁵⁹

By the end of the story, though, the fierce attitude that distinguishes him from the rest of the soldiers is revealed to be only a simulation, which covers cowardice and pusillanimity. Ferro Maria Ferri creates a group of elite troopers, called by the hyperbolic — and parodic — name of 'Superarditi'. These men are supposed to be sent on the most

¹⁵⁹ Examples of the use of animal similes are the following: an officer reports that during a debrief 'il tenente mostrava i denti come un lupo'; at another point Maria Ferri's smirks are called 'sogghigni da lupo'; when he takes the word in a meeting the narrator states that 'scattò avanti come un serpente d'acciaio', Fusco, *Le Rose del Ventennio* (Turin: Einaudi, 1958; repr. Palermo: Sellerio, 2000), pp. 127, 129, 130.

dangerous missions; however, as the war goes by, no military operation appears perilous enough to require their services. The story ends on the contrast between these Fascists and the other Italians: the latter are represented by the wounded of the front, 'centinaia e centinaia di alpini e di fanti, medicati alla meglio negli ospedali da campo, operati sommariamente dai piccoli centri chirurgici'; the former by Ferro Maria Ferri's Superarditi who laugh, drink, and sing in their barracks, pretending to wait for missions that will never arrive.¹⁶⁰

Fusco's Fascist Lieutenant perfectly embodies the topos of the difference between the Italians and the Fascists: both because of his fierce aspect, which conflicts with the alleged pacific nature of the Italians, and his pusillanimity, which contrasts with the decency that is attributed to the common soldiers, Ferro Maria Ferri present clear differences from the rest of the Italians.

Conclusion

An important question that has been left unanswered concerns the degree of factuality of these four topoi. Historical data can actually be used to back up to some degree the representations of the texts discussed in this chapter. For instance, the use of brutal forms of repression by German soldiers in the territories that were occupied by the Nazi Third Reich is a

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 135.

historical reality that has been well documented.¹⁶¹ If one considers the numbers of murders, massacres, and deportations in the countries occupied by the Axis Powers it would not be difficult to argue that in the areas under the control of the Germans cases of repressive violence have quantitatively exceeded the same practices carried out in Italian-controlled areas.¹⁶²

Similarly, several historians who have worked on Greek oral histories have shown that many Greek citizens retained positive memories about the period of the Italian occupation.¹⁶³ Moreover, in Greece, at the end of the war, there were many mixed families with children born from relationships between Italian soldiers and local women.¹⁶⁴ Hence, by referring to these facts it could be argued that during the Axis occupations many Italians maintained decent behaviour, were not as ruthless and violent as the Germans, and did not disdain the attention of local women.

Likewise, in relation to the process of differentiation between the Fascists and the Italians, it must be stressed that there were great differences between fervent Fascists who, after the 8th of September 1943, chose to stay on the side of Mussolini and the many Italians who,

¹⁶¹ See Judt, *Postwar*, p. 14.

¹⁶² Borgomaneri, 'Introduzione', in *Crimini di guerra*, p. 12; Rodogno, *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo*, pp. 477-479.

¹⁶³ N. Doumanis, 'The Italian Empire and *brava gente*: Oral History and the Dodecanese Islands', in *Italian Fascism*, p. 162; S. Lecoeur, *Mussolini's Greek Island* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), p. 144.

¹⁶⁴ M. Clementi, *Camicie nere sull'Acropoli*, pp. 343-344; see also Doumanis, *Myth and Memory in the Mediterranean: Remembering Fascism's Empire* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 168-174.

instead, did not have strong political convictions, or opposed the regime, and took part in the Axis War only as a result of national conscription.

These examples show that each one of the topoi of the literature of the Axis War is grounded in some historical data. Yet, this thesis argues that factual reality alone cannot explain the formation and the continuous homogenous reoccurrence of these topoi. The fallacy of a simple historical explanation is easily proven by the fact that there are many other historical events, such as the cases in which the Italians brutally repressed the occupied populations and committed war crimes, that are completely at odds with the depiction created by these topoi.¹⁶⁵

The formation of these stereotypes must be connected, instead, to matters of collective memory. By relying on theories of memory it becomes possible, first of all, to understand better the relationship that these topoi establish with historical reality. Indeed, the fact that these stereotypes maintain ties with factual data is in line with studies on processes of memory distortions. Baumeister and Hastings have shown that cases in which memories are completely fabricated from scratch are rare; far more commonly people alter the memory of events they experienced and omit, exaggerate, or embellish certain aspects, in order to generate positive views of themselves.¹⁶⁶

Since the four topoi discussed here help to develop a positive representation of the Italians at war, as will be discussed at length in the next chapter, these stereotypes seem likely to be the results of processes

¹⁶⁵ On the Italian war crimes see Introduction, note 22.

¹⁶⁶ Baumeister, Hastings, 'Distortions of Collective Memory', in *Collective Memory of Political Events*, pp. 281-282.

of memory distortion. As all the authors considered in this chapter served in the Italian army, these distortions could be located at the level of the authors' individual memory, affecting the ways these men configured the memories of their own participation in the Axis War and externalised them in the texts. However, given the consistency and reiteration of these topoi, it seems more likely to locate the distortions that generated these topoi in the memory narratives negotiated by the veterans.

Gabriella Gribaudi, in a study on the memories of ex-servicemen of the Axis War, identifies the same tropes that have been discussed in this chapter on the basis of literary representations, such as the idea of the pacific nature of the Italians, the disdain towards the Fascists, the brutality of the Germans, and the centrality given to love experiences.¹⁶⁷ Hence, it can be argued that these stereotypical depictions originated at the level of the individual memory of the ex-servicemen, as a result of processes of distortions, became part of the dominant memory narratives of the group memory of the veterans, and then were integrated by the writers of the main corpus into their texts.

Yet, besides the connections that the topoi have with the specific memory of the Axis War, it must be noted that these stereotypes also relate to more general features of the Italian collective memory of World War II. In fact three of the topoi discussed in this chapter, i.e. the idea of *Italiani brava gente*, and the notions of the difference between the Italians and the Germans and between the Italians and the Fascists, were not only

¹⁶⁷ G. Gribaudi, *Combattenti, sbandati, prigionieri: esperienze e memorie di reduci della seconda guerra mondiale* (Rome: Donzelli, 2016), pp. 211-223.

recurrent features of the narrativisation of the Axis War, but, more generally, they characterised a vast majority of the memory narratives that circulated in postwar Italy, and can now be seen as dominant traits of the Italian memory discourse of World War II.

Focardi has been the first one to stress that the ideas of the good nature of the Italians and of the evilness of the Germans have been so widespread in postwar Italy that they have formed the backbone of the Italian memory discourse of World War II.¹⁶⁸ For what concerns the difference between the Italians and the Fascists, this thesis has already stressed how the sense of detachment from the Fascist past has been one of the central elements of the articulation of the Italian memory of World War II, which resulted in the broadly held assumption, as Stephen Gundle has stated, that 'by the end of the war the nation had become detached from [the regime's] values and practices'.¹⁶⁹

The formation in postwar Italy of a memory discourse based on these ideas can be connected to a broader process of renegotiation of the Italian identity, after twenty years of Fascism. Emilio Gentile has shown that at the centre of the Fascist cultural agenda there was a project of reshaping of the national identity according to a series of values that could enhance Italy's role as a powerful, dominant, and idiosyncratically modern nation.¹⁷⁰ The collapse of Fascism at the end of the war opened up a phase of redefinition of the sense of Italianness that implied, first of

¹⁶⁸ Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*, p. xii. See also Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, p. 73.

¹⁶⁹ S. Gundle 'The Aftermath of Mussolini's Cult', in Gundle, C. Duggan, G. Pieri, *The Cult of the Duce: Mussolini and the Italians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), p. 243.

¹⁷⁰ Gentile, *Fascismo*, pp. 80-83; Patriarca, *Italianità*, pp. 153-163.

all, a rejection of those views and values that had been endorsed by the regime.

The topoi discussed in this chapter were a part of this process in the ways that they developed representations of Italianness that could contrast and deny some aspects of the anthropological model that had been fostered under Fascism. The emphasis placed on the fact that the Italians were, for several reasons, different from both the Fascists and the Germans is a clear indicator of this process. These two acts of differentiation aimed to create a gulf between democratic Italy and its past as a Fascist dictatorship and aggressive member of the Axis Power, in order to open up spaces for the redefinition of a new identity.

Similarly, the idea of *Italiani brava gente*, which achieved such popularity in the aftermath World War II, was strongly entangled, as Patriarca has noticed, to the renegotiation of a post-Fascist identity.¹⁷¹ By reusing ideas, images, and self-representations that had permeated Italian culture through World War I myths, colonial propaganda, and Catholic iconography in the postwar years the Italians affirmed their goodness and peacefulness as constitutive features of their national character. In this way, by promoting the existence of a core of values that had survived unchanged, despite twenty years of dictatorship, they marked the abandoning of the idea of Italy as a nation of warriors that was fostered by the Fascist regime.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 125, 210.

¹⁷² See Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*, pp. 180-181.

The topos of the Sagapò army — which has not been listed by historians as a constituent element of the collective memories of World War II— can also be connected to this process of identity re-negotiation. This topos, indeed, testifies to the need to reaffirm the virility of the Italian man, which had been hampered by the disastrous defeats in the Axis War.¹⁷³ In doing so, this stereotype, more so than the others, maintained ties with Fascist culture, which had strongly endorsed the idea of a normative and performative masculinity as a paramount value for Italian manhood.¹⁷⁴

Yet, the sense of virility that this topos puts forward is moulded in constant opposition to military and imperialistic values, since it constructs the idea of the Italians as an innocuous and disengaged force of occupation. In this way, the defence of Italian virility was divested of the bellicose traits that Fascism assigned to it and it contributed to strengthening the idea of the Italians as unwarlike people.

The topoi discussed in this chapter go beyond the narrativisation of specific aspects of the Axis War and constitute points of connection between literary texts and the memory discourse of World War II. These texts reflected a series of beliefs that circulated in the postwar years and, by doing so, they worked as vectors of memory, conveying these views to

¹⁷³ Similar observations have been made by Ben-Ghiat, who has analysed the contribution of cinema to the renegotiation of Italian masculinity after the collapse of Fascism and the defeats in the war, Ben-Ghiat, 'Unmaking the Fascist Man: Masculinity, Film, and the Transition from Dictatorship', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 10.3 (2005) 336-365 (p. 337).

¹⁷⁴ Barbara Spackman saw in the idea of virility the rhetorical central point of Fascism, B. Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. x-xi.

the Italian readers, contributing to the formation and negotiation of the memory discourse of World War II.

Chapter 4: Themes of a Lost War

'It is well that war is so horrible —
we would grow too fond of it'.¹

Introduction

This chapter investigates some of the themes of the main corpus. As the theoretical discussion showed, a theme does not coincide with any particular point of a narrative discourse, but depends on the reader's acts of interpretation of several such points. By establishing connections among different parts of a narrative and by engaging with its recurrent elements, readers identify certain themes and interpret a text.

The relation between thematisation and interpretation implies that the recognition of a particular theme is a rather slippery and uncertain critical activity, which is always more elusive than the pinpointing of a series of motifs. Different readers may produce distinctive interpretations, which also entail the identification of dissimilar themes.

Yet, the degree of subjectivity that characterises an enquiry on such an interpretative matter can be partially reduced. One way of backing up the identification of a theme relies on the number of textual passages that contribute to its construction: the more numerous and

¹ G. Patton, *War as I know it* (Cambridge Ma.; The Riverside Press, 1947), pp. 337-338.

repeated these elements are, the more its identification appears plausible.² Moreover, besides quantitative questions, it is key to bear in mind that not all the themes that can be identified in a text possess the same importance. While certain themes appear paramount for a given narrative, others play a more minor role. Pellini suggests that thematic analyses should address, above all, the themes that strike the reader as central components of a text.³

This study, though, does not aim to offer a complete analysis of all the important themes that could be inferred from the texts of the main corpus — assuming that such a survey could be possible. By contrast, it intends to explore thematic aspects that, while being important for the considered narratives, are also significant for the establishment of a relationship between literary depictions and collective memory. The themes that will be analysed are those of innocence, victimhood, defeat, suffering, and horror. Each one of them will be discussed in a specific section of this chapter, while the conclusion will highlight the connections between these themes and the Italian collective memories of World War II.

These five themes, despite being underlined by scholars, have not usually been placed at the centre of analyses. Indeed, the critical reception of the literature of the Axis War has generally focused on two other thematic areas: the idea of heroism and, in particular, that of pacifism. The latter constitutes, according to Kaempfer, one of the main features of the

² Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, p. 95.

³ Pellini, 'Critica tematica e tematologia', *Allegoria*, p. 77.

modern 'récit de guerre' in Western culture and it has been extensively discussed by Italian scholars in relation to the literature of the Axis War.⁴

For instance, Giuseppe Langella, in a rare overview of the Alpine literature of World War II, underlines that one of the most powerful messages that comes out of these texts is 'la rivolta viscerale contro la logica delle armi'.⁵ Similarly, Antonio Motta points out that 'nella letteratura italiana la condanna della guerra è istintiva, popolare. Il suo rifiuto è immediato';⁶ while Pullini states that the Italian texts convey a sense of 'rifiuto della guerra in sé'.⁷

Moreover, many essays and articles devoted to individual authors of the main corpus, such as Cecovini, Malaparte, and above all Rigoni Stern, have underlined this pacifist standpoint.⁸ Langella, for instance, has claimed that Rigoni should not be seen as a war writer, but rather as 'uno scrittore di pace', since, as Motta points out, his books represent a 'l'accusa totale contro la guerra'.⁹ As a result of this critical interpretation, the books forming the main corpus have generally been read as texts characterised by a firm anti-war stance, promoting universal and pacifist values.

⁴ Kaempfer, *Poétique du récit de guerre*, p. 11.

⁵ G. Langella, 'Ecce Homo: qualche conclusione sulla letteratura alpina di gesta', in M. Ardizzone, ed., *Scrittori in divisa: memoria epica e valori umani: atti del convegno in occasione della 73esima adunata dell'Associazione Nazionale Alpini* (Brescia: Grafo, 2000), p. 180.

⁶ Motta, *Rigoni Stern*, p. 20.

⁷ G. Pullini, *Il romanzo italiano del dopoguerra 1940-1960* (Milan: Schwarz, 1961), p. 153.

⁸ On Cecovini see B. Maier, *La narrativa di Manlio Cecovini* (Trieste: Tip. Coana, 1964), pp. 19-21; Manacorda, 'Narrativa e memorialistica di guerra', in *Storia della Letteratura italiana contemporanea*, p. 303. On Malaparte see G. Grana, *Malaparte* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1968), pp. 77, 83; E. R. Laforgia, *Malaparte scrittore di guerra* (Florence: Vallecchi, 2011), p. 133. On Rigoni Stern see D. Bosca, 'Mario Rigoni Stern', in *Scrittori Italiani*, 9th series (Milan: Edizioni Letture, 1983), p. 120; F. Portinari, 'Introduzione', in Rigoni Stern, *I racconti di guerra*, pp. xxii-xxiii.

⁹ Langella, 'Ecce Homo', in *Scrittori in divisa*, p. 180; Motta, *Rigoni Stern*, pp. 4, 72.

In recent years Mondini has pointed out that this overbearing critical reading, despite highlighting undoubtedly genuine features of Italian war narratives on the Axis War, has also overlooked some equally crucial aspects¹⁰ Both Mondini and Gustavo Corni have underlined how in several texts of the Axis War literature readers also find the articulation of the theme of heroism.¹¹ This idea, indeed, has a strong prominence across the main corpus, even if re-modulated by the antiwar stance that all the narratives adopt, becoming what La Cauza has defined as 'l'eroismo di combattere senza gloria, senza bandiera e senza scopo'.¹²

The present work will not assume pacifism and heroism as main points of its enquiry. This choice leaves room to focus on the other important thematic aspects stated above. Yet themes are not isolated entities, but nuclei of meaning that are often related to one another, forming what scholars have called 'thematic clusters'.¹³ Hence, through the study of the five themes discussed in this chapter, the ideas of pacifism and heroism will at time also emerge.

While the study of the four topoi tried to embrace the entire corpus at once, four of the five sections of this chapter will be based on a subdivision of the corpus according to, naturally, thematic similarities. In other words, each theme will be exemplified through the texts that confer the most importance on it. When necessary, it will also be shown that

¹⁰ Mondini, *Alpini*, pp. 161-167.

¹¹ Ibid., 178; G. Corni *Raccontare la guerra*, pp. 19, 26, 64-67, 79, 119, 131-134. See also Mondini, 'Narrated Wars', in *Narrating War*, pp. 25-28.

¹² La Cauza, 'La letteratura della seconda guerra mondiale', in *Il Novecento*, p. 1282.

¹³ See Ceserani, Domenichelli, Fasano, 'Premessa', in *Dizionario dei temi letterari*, pp. vi-vii.

other narratives of the corpus have passages that relate to the theme in question; however, each section will focus on those texts where the theme appears to possess particular relevance.

The analysis of the first theme, though, constitutes a peculiar case: instead of focusing on specific texts, section one will take into account the entire corpus, since it develops an analysis based on the four topoi that were discussed in the previous chapter. In this section, thus, no further textual exemplifications will be added, but it will be shown how the four topoi of the literature of the Axis War take part in the construction of the theme of innocence.

4.1 Innocence

In an overview of this theme, Paolo Zanolini defines innocence as 'lo stato di chi non è contaminato dal male, o semplicemente lo ignora, e quindi non è capace di commetterlo'.¹⁴ In this definition innocence is conceived of in relation to two features: firstly, an ontological dimension according to which the innocent person possesses a virtuous nature deprived of evilness; secondly, a performative dimension in which innocence stands for the lack of wrongdoings.

Moreover, this conceptualisation entails that innocence can be conceived of only in a dialectic relationship with its opposite. It is the

¹⁴ P. Zanolini, 'Innocenza', in *Dizionario dei temi letterari*, p. 1186.

existence of evil that makes the recognition of innocence possible. Hence, the identification of a state of innocence inevitably relates to the acknowledgement of evilness and to the attribution of blame. Being innocent means not being blameworthy of something that happened and of which, therefore, someone else must be considered responsible.

Literary scholars who have worked on segments of the Axis War literature have underlined that the Italian war narratives construct a sense of innocence.¹⁵ In fact, across the texts of the main corpus, innocence appears as one of the most widespread themes, which is constructed through two movements that respect the conceptualisation described by Zanotti.

The first one consists in developing an essentialist representation of Italianness that appears irreprehensible and without any serious faults. This is achieved by the topoi of the Good soldier and of the Sagapò army, which characterise the Italians as harmless and non-violent people who are not affected by the violent mood created by warfare.

This depiction, representing the Italians as ontologically blameless, is coupled with a performative dimension, since the Italians are not usually shown as perpetrators of wrongdoings. According to the representation developed by the majority of the texts of the corpus, Italian soldiers may have committed unmilitary actions, such as stealing products from the army storehouses and indulging in forbidden

¹⁵ For instance, Isnenghi, in his study of the memoirs of the Russian front, has underlined that the authors of these texts develop a 'modo tendenzialmente innocentista di vedere se stessi'; similarly Mondini has noted that Alpine texts on World War II represent the Italian soldiers as 'immune dalla brutalizzazione — e, va da se, dalle responsabilità — della guerra': Isnenghi, *Le guerre degli Italiani*, p. 165; Mondini, *Alpini*, p. 208.

relationships with local women, but they always behaved in decent ways, never enjoyed the cruelty of violence, and were not responsible for war crimes.

Santarelli has pointed out that this standardized portrait of the Italian soldier in the Axis War:

Evokes a less than edifying image of the armed forces' valour; but by its very evocation it creates the premise for a kind of preventive and unconditional absolution. [...] The Italians seem definitely less credible in the guise of conquerors, and even less credible as an army of butchers and torturers.¹⁶

The topoi of the Good soldier and of the Sagapò army essentialise the Italians, trapping them in stereotypes, and allow the construction of a theme of innocence based on the allegedly good nature of the Italian soldier who is presented as ontologically incapable of performing evil actions.

The second movement whereby the theme of innocence is constructed consists in the identification of certain groups to whom the blame that is never attributed to the Italians can be ascribed. Indeed, according to sociologist Neil Smelser the attribution of responsibility and blame is an ineluctable part of the process of dealing with past violence.¹⁷ After a tragic experience such as a war, which caused havoc, pain, and death, questions of responsibility are inevitably raised and need to find some sort of answer. This is why Barabar, Jaeger, and Muller note that

¹⁶ L. Santarelli, 'Muted Violence', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, p. 282.

¹⁷ N. J. Smelser, 'Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma', in *Cultural Trauma*, p. 52.

war representations are 'practically inseparable' from questions of agency, blame, and responsibility.¹⁸

In the literature of the Axis War, however, the representations of Italians as harmless and non-violent people leave similar questions unsolved. A response to these issues is instead developed by the other two topoi, which divert the responsibility for the war onto the Germans and the Fascists. In order to better understand this process it is necessary to resort to the literature that investigates the mechanism of scapegoating.

René Girard is the philosopher who has written the most on the process of scapegoating. He has applied this mechanism to understand ancient sacrificial rituals across the world, for the study of Greek mythology, and for Biblical hermeneutic, transforming this process into what Wolfgang Palaver has called 'an all-encompassing theory of culture'.¹⁹ Yet, besides ancient beliefs, religious studies, and ethnographic interests, Girard has stressed that scapegoatism constitutes a 'mécanisme psychosociologique' that affects modern societies as well.²⁰

Similarly, Tom Douglas, who in his work on scapegoating offers a non-strictly Girardian interpretation of this process based on psychological studies and group-work practices, argues that in modern societies scapegoating constitutes neither a ritual nor a symbolic act, but

¹⁸ Barabar, Jaeger, Muller, 'Introduction', in *Fighting Words*, p. 10.

¹⁹ W. Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013) p. 135.

²⁰ R. Girard, *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris: Grasset, 1978), p. 200.

should be seen as a 'pattern of social behaviour' that can have both conscious and unconscious explanations.²¹

For both Girard and Douglas, what lays at the centre of this process is 'une propension fondamentale chez les hommes', consisting in the need to evade blame and 'escape from the pressures of being held responsible for bad feelings and events'.²² After unfavourable happenings, people tend to externalise their part of the blame and ascribe it to a third party— the scapegoat — that becomes the only bearer of responsibility.²³ This process allows people to maintain positive views of themselves, by discharging the unwanted 'unacceptable parts of the self' on others.²⁴

Girard argues that it is especially when it is not easy or possible to indicate clearly who holds responsibility for a given event that communities tend to channel their own sense of guilt onto scapegoats.²⁵ Post-conflict societies, therefore, appear as an extremely fertile context for the development of a similar psychological mechanism. Hence, it is not surprising that Wolfgang Schivelbusch, in his study on cultural responses to military defeats in Western societies, has found several examples of this process.²⁶

²¹ T. Douglas, *Scapegoats: Transferring Blame* (New York; London: Routledge, 1995), p. 107.

²² Girard, *Des Choses cachées*, pp. 65-66; Douglas, *Scapegoats*, pp. 32, 70, 82. See also Smelser, 'Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma', in *Cultural Trauma*, p. 52.

²³ The notion of scapegoating, thus, is closely related to cases of discrimination, persecution, riots, and witch-hunt campaigns, which in numerous historical situations have entailed the actual murder of innocent people. However, the aspect that is relevant for the present analysis regards the psychological dimension of this process, as a way of transferring blame.

²⁴ Douglas, *Scapegoats*, p. 117.

²⁵ Girard, *Des Choses cachées*, p. 40.

²⁶ W. Schivelbusch, *La cultura dei vinti* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006), p. 16.

One of the key features of this mechanism concerns the way in which the scapegoat is selected. According to Girard, Douglas and other scholars who have studied the phenomenon, this selection process is twofold. First of all, targets of scapegoating are usually people or groups who, despite being part of a particular community, present a series of specific traits that make them look different, and therefore recognisable.²⁷ Secondly, scapegoats must be unable to retaliate, as a result of their weak position within the power structure of society.²⁸

This phenomenon, therefore, is often related to cases of persecution against minorities, who are characterised by both recognisable traits and lower social power.²⁹ Scapegoats are usually found, indeed, among a community's 'internal-others', groups that live at the fringes of society and that maintain cultural traits that preserve their differences.³⁰ Yet, as Girard argues, in moments of social crisis, social elites can also become scapegoats.³¹ Even in this case the selection process relays on the identification of a series of differences, this time in the form of privileges.³²

The Italian literature of the Axis War appears strongly affected by a scapegoating mechanism, which sheds light on the way the Germans and the Fascists are portrayed across the corpus. Indeed, Chris Flaming has

²⁷ Girard, *Le Bouc émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982), pp. 26-33; Douglas, *Scapegoats*, p. 135.

²⁸ Girard, *La Violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972), p. 26; Douglas, *Scapegoats*, pp. 137-138.

²⁹ Girard, *Le Bouc émissaire*, pp. 28-29; Douglas, *Scapegoats*, p. 143.

³⁰ Girard, *Des Choses cachées*, p. 189; Girard, *La Violence et le sacré*, p. 24. On the idea of internal other see C. Johnson, A. Coleman, 'The Internal Other: Exploring the Dialectical Relationship between Regional Exclusion and the Construction of National Identity', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 102.4 (2012), 863-880 (p. 875).

³¹ Girard, *Le Bouc émissaire*, pp. 30-33; see also Douglas, *Scapegoats*, p. 138.

³² Girard, *Le Bouc émissaire*, p. 32.

noted that in cultural representations, groups that are targets of scapegoatism are characterised by a series of differences that make them appear grotesque and readily identifiable.³³ In the texts of the corpus not only are the Germans and the Fascists connoted in negative ways, but they are always opposed to the Italians and depicted in ways that make their difference apparent. These representations outline two straightforwardly recognisable groups from which the Italians always differ.

The clear delimitation of these three groups, i.e. the Germans, the Fascists, and the Italians, contributes to redefining the sense of Italianness along two lines. The first one is outward-looking: by stressing the differences from the Germans the texts dismiss Italy's role as a member of the Axis Power and deny that the Italians could have had something to do within the plan of creating a Fascist supranational order. The second is inward-looking: by singling out the Fascists, the texts reshape the perimeter of the Italian community and transform the latter into a proper internal-other, representing the only segment of Italian society that can be associated with the Germans.

Through the processes of differentiation developed by the topoi, the texts of the Axis War literature provide their readers with two identifiable groups that constitute two easy targets upon which the blame that is not attributed to the Italians can be cast. In this way the

³³ C. Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p. 49.

responsibility for the Axis War is kept outside the perimeter of the Italian community and is transferred onto the Germans and the Fascists.

It is important to point out that both the Nazis and the Fascists bore heavy responsibilities for the Axis War. This fact may appear to present a contradiction. Palaver, for instance, defines the scapegoat as a person 'who — as a result of a spontaneous psychological mechanism — is blamed for the mistakes or sins of others'.³⁴ According to this definition, it seems impossible to argue that in the texts of the corpus the Germans and the Fascists play the role of the scapegoats for something for which they were actually culpable.

This apparent problem can, however, be easily resolved. In *Le bouc émissaire* Girard shows several cases in which a scapegoat mechanism is established between the accusers and the accused, in spite of the fact that the accusations were well-founded.³⁵ Similarly Gordon Allport and Bernard Kramer have argued that it is not necessary to assume that in every case of scapegoating the victim must be 'lily-white in his innocence'.³⁶

The scapegoat mechanism that affects the Italian literature of the Axis War does not transfer the guilt for the war onto groups that bear no responsibility for it. By contrast, the texts develop a series of depictions that emphasise the responsibility of the Germans and the Fascists, meaning those groups who hold a great share in the outbreak of World

³⁴ Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, p. 152.

³⁵ Girard, *Le Bouc émissaire*, pp. 31-32.

³⁶ G. W. Allport, B. M. Kramer, 'Some Roots of Prejudice', *Journal of Psychology*, 22 (1946) quoted by B. Zawadzki, 'Limitations of the Scapegoat Theory of Prejudice', *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 43 (1948), 127-141 (p. 132).

War II. By doing so, the narratives channel all the blame onto these two groups and can develop representations of the Italians that maintain the idea of their innocence.

4.2 Defeat

During the Axis War the Italian army suffered major defeats on basically all the fronts where it operated. Military losses resulted firstly in the loss of the East-African colonies and then in the invasion of the national territory, which led to the collapse of Fascism and to a separate surrender to the Allies. As a result of these historical events the literature of the Axis War confers great prominence on the theme of defeat.

For instance, all the texts of the corpus that deal with the military operations in Greece revolve around larger or smaller debacles encountered by the Italian army.³⁷ Pirelli's *L'entusiasta* narrates a story that takes place during the collapse of the Italian front in the last days of December 1940. While the two protagonists, the officer Pietro Andreis and the Alpine soldier Antonio Da Rin, are ascending a mountain, trying to reach their battalions, they encounter numerous Italians coming from the

³⁷ In the first weeks after the declaration of war against Greece, Italian troops had advanced in Epirus; however, by the end of November 1940 they were halted by the Greek army. From that moment on the Italians progressively lost positions and were pushed back for fifty kilometres into the Albanian border, where the front finally stabilised in February 1941. See Ceva, *Storia delle forze armate*, p. 291; Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. 277.

opposite direction where 'il fronte era andato a pezzi'.³⁸ The narrator describes these men as crestfallen, as the embodiment of a 'drammatico senso di uno sfacelo completo'.³⁹

Later on the two see flashes of explosions and hear distant clashes, which are signs, as the narrator explains, that 'il fronte [...] andava a remengo'.⁴⁰ On Christmas Eve the Italian army is completely overwhelmed and Pirelli offers a powerful depiction of the debacle:

Decine di migliaia di uomini, disfatti nel fisico e nel morale, affamati, laceri, [...] gli ufficiali mescolati a caso ai soldati, procedevano all'indietro, nel buio, quali sotto la pioggia e nel fango, quali nella neve e tra la tempesta, mossi e sorretti da un'ansia comune: sfuggire al nemico che da ogni lato incalzava. [...] Era il caos.⁴¹

This gloomy description, highlighting the fear that overwhelmed the soldiers, the disorganisation of their withdrawal, and the logistical difficulties they faced, transmits the sense of downfall and total disaster experienced by the Italians.

Significantly, the idea of defeat — conveyed again by the word 'sfacelo' — reappears in a particularly relevant moment near the conclusion of the story. Pietro Andreis, who has been injured and cannot move, observes with a sense of powerlessness a group of Italian retreating soldiers being killed by the Greeks. This triggers a reflection on the contrasts between the beliefs about the war he had before departing as a volunteer, and his actual war experience, embodied in 'quel

³⁸ Pirelli, *L'entusiasta*, p. 44.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 55.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 61.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 83.

disordine, quello sfacelo' that unfolds before his eyes.⁴² In this passage the acknowledgement of the defeat and of the chaos and suffering it generates appears as a crucial moment in Andrei's participation in the Axis War, which strongly contrasts with the expectations that had been cultivated by the Fascist regime.

A similar sense of ruin characterises other texts of the Italo-Greek war. Rigoni Stern in *Quota Albania*, when recounting the withdrawal of the Italians troops, evokes the family memory of Caporetto, the most infamous defeat in Italian history: 'camminando pieno di amarezza, mi accompagna il ricordo dei racconti di mio padre sulla ritirata di Caporetto'.⁴³ Cecovini, in *Ritorno da Poggio Boschetto*, depicts many assaults in which the Italians are defeated, as the following:

Per due volte gli Alpini raggiunsero la cima maledetta e ne furono ricacciati; alla terza una compagnia ridotta a non più d'un manipolo d'uomini sanguinosi e pesti ributtò l'ultimo nemico e si accovacciò nelle sue trincee. Ma tutto fu vano. [...] Agli alpini superstiti, scoperti da ogni parte e senza più munizioni, non restò che ripiegare sulle proprie trincee trascinando con sé i feriti e i corpi dei caduti.⁴⁴

This short-lived conquest of an advanced position on the Greek mountains clearly conveys a sense of uselessness and failure: the cost of the action has been high, many men have fallen, and the few who survived, being unable to control the position, have to abandon it.

Yet, the most disastrous experience narrated by Italian war writers, which strongly embodies the defeat of the nation in World War II,

⁴² Ibid., p. 89.

⁴³ Rigoni, *Quota Albania*, p. 62.

⁴⁴ Cecovini, *Poggio Boschetto*, p. 290.

is the retreat from the Eastern front.⁴⁵ In *La guerra dei poveri*, at the beginning of the withdrawal, the officer Revelli tries to keep order among his troops, but finds it impossible since everywhere 'c'è il caos, c'è il movimento convulso delle colonne, degli sbandati'.⁴⁶ In spite of the efforts of several officers the withdrawal becomes a chaotic flight. Revelli shows his mortification in a paragraph formed by a single short sentence, which conveys a sense of irremediable catastrophe: 'è il disastro'.⁴⁷

The complete breakdown of what once were Italian battalions is a recurrent point in the texts on the Russian retreat. Here is Revelli again: 'disordine, indisciplina, incoscienza, insubordinazione, diserzione. È il disastro, la fuga pazzesca di una massa senza reparti, senza armi!'.⁴⁸ Similarly, in Bedeschi's *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio* the fights between the Italians and the Soviets during the retreat are presented as battles between uneven forces, since the Italians have lost any military directive and they can no longer be considered an organized army. In a description of one of these attacks the narrator writes: 'i russi cominciarono allora a gettarsi sullo sfacelo'.⁴⁹ Here the word 'sfacelo' reappears again and is used, metonymically, to indicate the retreating Italian battalions.

The centrality that the theme of defeat acquires in the Italian literature of the Axis War is also proven by the fact that in texts that do

⁴⁵ Between mid December 1942 and January 1943 numerous troops of Italian soldiers had to abandon, at different times, the front line on the river Don and walk through the Russian steppe, surrounded by enemies, for more than ten days. See Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, pp. 392-393; H. Hamilton, *Sacrifice on the Steppe: The Italian Alpine Corps in the Stalingrad Campaign 1942-1943* (Havertown, Pa; Newbury: Casemate, 2011).

⁴⁶ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 44.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 81.

⁴⁹ Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. 334.

not focus directly on the war campaigns, but on events that follow the 8th of September 1943, the previous period of war can be summed up entirely by references to defeats. For instance, in a passage already quoted from *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia*, Aldo Puglisi remembers the time of the Greek campaign through a single reference to the 'pianure di Koritza', across which the Italian troops had to withdraw.⁵⁰

Similarly, in *I villaggi bruciano*, one of the few passages referring to events that predate the 8th of September 1943 is constituted by a list of places where Italian soldiers were killed:

Dreznica, Jablanica, Aleksin Han, Konijc... nomi nefasti agli annali italiani di guerra. Nella primavera del '43, s'ebbero lì più di duemila morti: tutte le guarnigioni furono sommerse e travolte da un'ondata di partigiani.⁵¹

In these two narratives the moments at which the Italians encountered defeat are the only references to battles fought by the Italian army as a Fascist country, conveying the idea that the experience of defeat is able to embody the totality of Italy's participation in the Axis War.

As a result of the prominence given to this theme, defeat becomes the main paradigm whereby the Axis War is approached and narrated, a fact that results in an extreme selectivity concerning what the literature of the Axis War represents and conveys to its readers. Isnenghi has already underlined this aspect in relation to the memoirs of the Russian campaign. He states that 'la memorialistica di Russia ci appare tutta intenta al ritorno, pensa e si muove materialmente e mentalmente da

⁵⁰ Venturi, *Bandiera bianca*, p. 26.

⁵¹ Nesti, *I villaggi bruciano*, p. 245.

oriente a occidente' and notes that on other aspects of this campaign the writers of the memoirs 'non hanno molta voglia di interrogarsi. O, per lo meno, di raccontarcelo'.⁵²

Corni has returned to this point and illustrated it more thoroughly: he argues that what is missing in the representations developed by the memoirs is not so much the departure and the entrance into the Soviet Union; but rather everything that has to do with the acts of aggression, when the Italians carried out 'highly significant military and anti-partisan operations'.⁵³

The memoirs by Corti, Revelli, and Rigoni conform to this general trait that Isnenghi and Corni ascribe to the memoirs of the Russian campaign: they focus entirely on the tragic withdrawal from the River Don and allocate almost no space to events that happened previously. What appears significant is that this selective focus on defeat has then been re-proposed by other texts of the corpus that dealt with the Russian campaign.

For instance, when Rigoni Stern and Revelli decided to narrate other experiences of that military campaign, they chose to deal once again with episodes of defeat.⁵⁴ Revelli relates a useless assault carried out on the 1st of September 1942, which did not lead to any result and cost the

⁵² Isnenghi, *Le guerre degli italiani*, p. 255.

⁵³ Corni, 'Italy after 1945', in *The Legacies of Two World Wars*, p. 259; see also Corni, *Raccontare la guerra*, p. 33.

⁵⁴ The texts in which these narratives appear are Rigoni Stern's *Ritorno sul Don* and the first part of Revelli's *La guerra dei poveri*. The latter constitutes the complete volume of Revelli's war narratives, which includes previously unpublished pages on the beginning of the Axis War, the memoir on the retreat from the Eastern front that Revelli published in 1946, and the memoir on his experience as a partisan in the Italian Civil War.

lives of many men.⁵⁵ The same event was then re-evoked by Rigoni Stern in 'Nella steppa di Kotovskij', one of the short stories of *Ritorno sul Don*. Rigoni's unit captures a position behind the enemy lines, but something in the plan of attack goes wrong: the supporting battalion that was supposed to intervene does not show up. Hence, Rigoni and his men have to retreat and many of them do not make it back to the base.⁵⁶ Even in these cases the Italian texts focus on defeats and retreats.

Other texts of the main corpus that address the Russian campaign portray only its tragic conclusion, and keep the events concerning the invasion of the Soviet Union outside the visible area of the diegetic world, within portions of zero texture. In *Giovinezza*, *Giovinezza* the events on the Russian front are related by an intradiegetic narrator, the soldier Ferriera, who is hospitalised in Italy together with Giulio, the protagonist of the story. In the first of his narrations Ferriera remembers the time of his departure in the summer of 1942 and the first days his battalion spent in Ukraine, offering a depiction of this period according to the topoi of the Good soldier and the Sagapò army: the Italians fraternize with the local population, especially with the women, and everything goes by as if the war was a faraway reality.⁵⁷ When Giulio meets Ferriera again, the soldier, with an ellipsis, resumes his account directly from the vicissitudes of the retreat. Nothing is added on the advancement through Russia, which remains confined in a permanent gap in the narrative.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, pp. 19-21.

⁵⁶ Rigoni, *Ritorno sul Don*, pp. 176-181.

⁵⁷ Preti, *Giovinezza*, pp. 284, 286.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 288-292.

Similarly, in Morante's *La Storia*, the only episode related to the Axis War is the retreat from the Soviet Union, narrated through the digression about the death of Giovannino Marrocco. All these examples show that the prominence that the literature of the Axis War gives to the theme of defeat also engenders a series of omissions: the moments in which the Italians were defeated are repeatedly foregrounded to the detriment of other episodes of the Axis War that are kept outside the area of representation.

Finally, it must be stressed that across the corpus the theme of defeat is reinforced by a recurrent motif concerning the weakness of Italy's armament. The deficiency of the Italian weaponry has been underlined by several military historians.⁵⁹ Yet Schivelbusch has observed that an emphasis on the military superiority of the enemy is a recurrent feature of the war writings produced by people who experienced defeat.⁶⁰ Hence, in spite of the historical data attesting the underdevelopment of the Italian army, the insistence with which the authors of the corpus address this issue seems to exceed factual reporting, evoking a series of further meanings.

⁵⁹ Scholars have argued that what made the Italian army out-dated was not the use of weapons that dated to the period of World War I, such as the rifle 91, since similar firearms were used by all the armies; it was instead the scarcity of automatic rifles that penalised the Italian battalions. Similarly, among their tanks and airplanes the Italian army did not have a sufficient number of modern machines. For instance, Ceva has shown that a wide production of automatic weapons, such as the Beretta machine-gun, began only in 1942, and he has calculated that of the heavy tanks commissioned at the beginning of the war only 5.6% were actually produced. These facts show that Fascist Italy, overall, was a minor power, with a reduced industrial capacity, affected by disorganization and lack of productive strategies, which was incapable of competing with the main actors of the conflict. See Ceva, *Storia delle Forze Armate*, p. 275, 346-347; Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, pp. 305-310, 383; Zunino, *La Repubblica e il suo passato*, pp. 96-97.

⁶⁰ Schivelbusch, *La cultura dei vinti*, p. 21.

For instance, in *Ritorno da Poggio Boschetto*, in a scene describing the Italian attempt to fire back against an Allied plane that has attacked their positions, the narrator states that 'era stata roba da ridere', since the Italian machine-guns were too weak and 'non erano fatti per quell'uso'.⁶¹ In *La guerra dei poveri*, Revelli defines the grenades provided to the Italian army with an oxymoron, as 'bombe a mano incredibilmente innocue e umanitarie, che non sempre scoppiavano'.⁶² In Rigoni Stern's books readers encounter several rifles that are stuck and bombs that do not explode, as a result of the extremely low temperature of the Russian winter in which the faulty Italian weapons do not work, as in the following scene:

Il tenente volle tirare un colpo di pistola per vedere se le vedette stavano all'erta. La pistola fece: clic. Io allora provai a tirare un colpo di moschetto e il moschetto fece: clic. Mi disse infine di gettare una bomba a mano e la bomba a mano non fece nemmeno clic, sparì nella neve senza fare alcun rumore.⁶³

Mondini has argued that the continuous references to the faultiness and weakness of the Italian weapons re-propose 'gli anti-miti dell'italiano "imbelle"'.⁶⁴ In all the passages quoted above, indeed, the texts underplay, or deny completely, the possibility that the Italians could do harm with their weapons and, by doing so, they reinforce the representation of the Italians as innocuous soldiers.

⁶¹ Cecovini, *Poggio Boschetto*, p. 319.

⁶² Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 15.

⁶³ Rigoni, *Il sergente*, p. 22.

⁶⁴ Mondini, *Alpini*, p. 223.

Furthermore, Mondini has observed that in many narratives the motif of the faulty weapons also becomes a source of pride, since such depictions enhance the bravery of the Italian soldiers, who are represented as doing the best they can, notwithstanding the inferiority of the conditions in which they operate.⁶⁵ In other words, across the corpus this motif allows the authors to celebrate the resilience of the Italian soldiers, who were doomed to be defeated, according to a process that Marino Biondi has called 'un'apologia di valore nella sconfitta'.⁶⁶

While relating to the theme of heroism, the motif of the deficiency of the Italian weaponry is also connected to that of defeat and contributes to strengthening it. In fact, by insisting on the weakness and misery of the Italian army the texts powerfully convey the idea that defeat was the only possible outcome of a war that the Italians were sent to fight without preparation and adequate equipment.

4.3 Victimhood

Schivelbusch has pointed out that another common feature of war narratives in countries that have been vanquished consists in indulging in forms of self-victimization.⁶⁷ The literature of the Axis War is no exception and across the texts of the main corpus victimhood constitutes

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 223.

⁶⁶ M. Biondi, *Tempi di uccidere: la grande guerra: letteratura e storiografia* (Arezzo: Helicon, 2015), p. 453.

⁶⁷ Schivelbusch, *La cultura dei vinti*, pp. 18-19.

an extremely important theme, which is constructed through a wide range of textual strategies.

Among the elements that take part in the formation of this theme, the motif of the faultiness of the Italian armament again plays a part, as can be inferred from the following passage of *La guerra dei poveri*:

I nostri parabellum arrugginiti non sparano. Lanciamo una decina di bombe a mano: non scoppiano. I mitragliatori senza olio e per il gelo non sparano. E i russi da dieci metri sparano, ammazzano.⁶⁸

In this excerpt Revelli describes the great difficulties with which the Italians, impaired by their faulty weaponry, fight against the more efficient Red Army. This portrayal presents the battle as a clash between uneven forces and contributes to conferring the role of victims on the Italians.

Another textual strategy constructing the theme of victimhood consists in emphatically underlining the pitiable fate of the Italian soldiers. For instance, in *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio* the Russians who chase the Italian troops are no longer taking part in a proper battle, but are instead hunting a group of wretched people: ‘non era più guerra, era ormai facile caccia contro *sventurati*’.⁶⁹ In *Sagapò* to the eyes of a British commando, who easily eliminates a group of Italian guards, the latter appear as nothing more than unfortunate men: “‘è stata una cosa facile” disse un sottufficiale ispezionando lo scoglio “ma non per questi

⁶⁸ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, pp. 81-82.

⁶⁹ Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. 334. Here and in the subsequent quotations the emphasis is mine.

disgraziati”⁷⁰ These comments underline the miserable fate of the Italians, who have been sent to serve and die in foreign lands in the name of an imperialistic war, and induce the readers to sympathise with them.

A similar sense of compassion is achieved through the use of touching apostrophes, which the narrative voice addresses towards the Italian soldiers who have lost their lives or have suffered greatly. For instance, in *I più non ritornano*, the image of a wounded soldier begging for water moves the autodiegetic narrator and pushes him to a pitiable exclamation:

A un certo punto non poté più avanzare, e si mise a piangere, agitando la borraccia tedesca che aveva in mano. Il suo guaiolare si spargeva per breve tratto, intorno, nel vasto spiazzo ghiacciato. Lo raggiunsi: il comune volto nero e sofferente dei nostri meridionali; i lunghi denti scoperti in una smorfia. *Poveri fanti d'Italia!*⁷¹

Similarly, in *La guerra dei poveri*, when Revelli is finally outside the Soviet-controlled areas, and sees the poor conditions of those who survived, he writes: ‘*poveri Italiani: gente che ha combattuto e sofferto, gente che nel cuore porta ancora le visioni dei compagni caduti*’.⁷²

In Morante’s *La Storia*, too, the scene describing the death of Giovannino Marrocco portrays a wretched soldier who provokes the compassion of the narrative voice. While he is advancing stubbornly and hopelessly through the snow Giovannino falls in a crevasse from which he is not able to move. Morante lets him die there and closes the chapter by

⁷⁰ Biasion, *Sagapò*, p. 131.

⁷¹ Corti, *I più non ritornano*, p. 261.

⁷² Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 103.

directly addressing him with the words 'buona notte, biondino'.⁷³ Similarly to the previous cases, this apostrophe invites readers to empathise with the pitiful and unfortunate fate of the Italian soldiers and contribute to attributing to them the role of the victim.

The figure of Giovannino Marrocco is extremely telling in relation to this attribution. Stefania Lucamante has pointed out that *La Storia* is a novel that has been conceived 'in order to lend the voice to the subaltern', constituting 'an emblematic container for the private story of powerless characters'.⁷⁴ Similarly Raffaele Liucci has seen Morante's novel as a story about the victims of history.⁷⁵ According to the critic, all the main characters of the book are exposed to and degraded by the power that dominates society, which they hopelessly try to oppose.⁷⁶

Within the structure of *La Storia* the death of Giovannino Marrocco in Russia allows readers to list the Axis War soldiers as some of the many victims of history to whom the novel lends a voice. In this way the Italian soldiers seem to belong to the same category as other disempowered figures which the novel focus upon, such as the Italian Jewish minority persecuted by the Racial Laws, the poor, the infirm, the idealists, the anarchists, the children, the workers of the factories, and the animals.

Morante's novel is not the only text that establishes a more or less open connection between Italian soldiers and the victims of World War II. For instance, when at the end of *I villaggi bruciano* the protagonist spends

⁷³ Morante, *La Storia*, p. 387.

⁷⁴ S. Lucamante, "'The World Must Be the Writer's Concern': Elsa Morante's Vision of History", in *Elsa Morante's Politics of Writing*, pp. 88-89.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 120.

⁷⁶ Liucci, *La tentazione della 'casa in collina'*, p. 119.

a period of imprisonment in a German POW camp, the situation becomes an opportunity to enumerate the Italians among the victims of Germany:

L'Europa sarebbe stata ancora salvata dai barbari. Quel giorno non era lontano. E in quel giorno tutti i prigionieri italiani, polacchi, serbi, russi, francesi, belgi, olandesi, inglesi, avrebbero visto spalancare i cancelli dei tetri campi.⁷⁷

In this list the Italians appear side by side with all those countries that have fought against Germany from the beginning of the war, or that have been invaded by Germany without being first its ally.

Across the corpus, though, Germany represents only one of the possible persecutors of the Italians. In Revelli's book, besides the Germans, other victimisers of the Italian soldiers are the military commands that, with their incapacity, 'manda[no] al macello i reparti alpini', as the narrator constantly underscores.⁷⁸

In other texts, instead, the Italians are portrayed as victims of the Fascist regime. For instance, in *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia*, in one of the few passages in which the Italo-Greek war is remembered, the Italians think of the time when:

Si arrampicavano sulle montagne d'Albania, passo dietro passo, sentiero dopo sentiero, ora avanzando ora indietreggiando, coi muli piantati nel fango della Vojussa, che li videro morire così, abbandonati dietro di loro, gli occhi imploranti come lo avessero saputo. Quelli i muli della Vojussa, erano state le loro colonne corazzate! Il capitano [...] pensò alla grossa beffa che il duce aveva loro giocato, inventandoli guerrieri, e che li aveva buttati allo sbaraglio, come i muli della Vojussa.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Nesti, *I villaggi bruciano*, p. 340.

⁷⁸ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 20.

⁷⁹ Venturi, *Bandiera bianca*, p. 101.

The passage develops a representation of the Italian aggression towards Greece that focuses entirely on the suffering and misfortune of a wretched and badly equipped army. The final simile, establishing a comparison between the innocuous donkeys and the Italian soldiers, presents the latter as the victims of a political power that has deceived them and sent them to war without preparation.

Similarly, in *I villaggi bruciano*, in a dialogue in the prison camp between soldiers and officers, the latter describe the Italians as victims of the Fascist regime, which pushed its citizens to war by exposing them to propaganda since early childhood: as an officer remarks 'si fa presto ad illudere i ragazzi fra i banchi di scuola'.⁸⁰ All these passages show that in different contexts the texts identify distinct types of victimisers; however, they constantly ascribe to the Italians the role of victims.

Another example of this process of self-victimisation is offered by an extremely telling passage of 'Ritorno sul Don'. Rigoni, who is visiting the city of Kiev together with a Soviet guide from the Intourist travel agency, finds a monument commemorating the soldiers and the common citizens who died in World War II. Before this memorial Rigoni declares his proximity to all the men and women who lost their lives in those tragic years:

Ed è per questo che vorrei camminare per le strade come uno di loro; come quel contadino dalla faccia tartara, quel mutilato con le stampelle, quell'operaio con le mani in tasca e la

⁸⁰ Nesti, *I villaggi bruciano*, pp. 327-328.

berretta alla Lenin che si fuma la sua papiroscka aspettando il tram. O sedermi accanto a quell'ebreo, chissà come sopravvissuto, che sulla panchina si gode il sole guardando i ragazzi che giocano. No, noi qui non eravamo come i tedeschi. [...] Per questo posso dire tranquillamente – là italianschi, — e voi rispondermi sorridendo — Italianschi carasciò!⁸¹

In this extract many of the motifs that have been already analysed merge together. The passage affirms once again the goodness of the Italians through the differentiation from the Germans. Moreover, it distances the Italians from the role of perpetrators by listing them at the side of the victims of the war, represented by the Russian peasant, the wounded veteran, and, more evidently, by the Jew who survived Nazi extermination. This depiction enhances the view that the Italians were not invaders, but victims of the war.⁸²

A reason that contributes to explaining the strong sense of victimhood that permeates the Italian texts can be found in the motivations that pushed many of these men to write books about the Axis War. Alfano has stressed that a powerful spur that pushes many veterans to write after they come back from zones of war is the urge to remember the many companions who did not return.⁸³ This motivation emerges strongly from the Italian literature of the Axis War and sometimes is openly stated in the books' extra-textual apparatus. For instance, in the preface to his first novel, Bedeschi claims that in his work 'la guerra è

⁸¹ Rigoni, *Ritorno sul Don*, p. 290.

⁸² Isnenghi, *Le guerre degli italiani*, p. 165; see also Schlemmer, *Invasori, non vittime*, pp. 4-5.

⁸³ Alfano, *Ciò che ritorna*, pp. 66-67.

vista, per così dire, dalla parte dei morti'.⁸⁴ Similarly Corti dedicated his first memoir to all his comrades who lost their lives:

[queste pagine] siano anzitutto preghiera/ per i molti che mi amarono, con me vissero/ e divisero il pane, con me combatterono/ e soffrirono, con me dolorosamente sperarono,/ e infine giacquero senza vita/ sulle interminabili strade della steppa.⁸⁵

The memory of the many who did not make it through the war haunted those who survived and compelled them to write, in order to offer a last homage to those who had fallen.

The necessity of commemorating and remembering late comrades is a central feature of the texts of the main corpus. Many of them, indeed, find in the moment in which a companion loses his life a powerful point of climax: the death of Gardi in *Ritorno da Poggio Boschetto*, Da Rin in *L'entusiasta*, soldiers Pagnotta, Saverio, and Pasqualino Locoforte in *Sagapò*, and the numerous evocations in the memoirs of Corti, Revelli, and Rigoni of the last times the autodiegetic narrator saw a companion, or a friend, represent some of the most touching scenes of the Italian war literature.

Moreover, across the corpus there are innumerable passages that narrate the last moments of life of unimportant characters, who appear in the diegetic world of a narrative only when they pass away. As Langella points out, the literature of the Axis War — as much as any other war

⁸⁴ Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. vii.

⁸⁵ Corti, *I più non ritornano*, p. 5.

literature — ‘è costellata di croci e di mesti, pietosi riti di sepoltura’.⁸⁶ As a vivid example one can consider Rigoni’s account after the battle of Nikolayevka, when he remembers more than eight fallen companions in less than two pages:

Questo è stato il 26 gennaio 1943. I miei più cari amici mi hanno lasciato in quel giorno. Di Rino, rimasto ferito durante il primo attacco non sono riuscito a sapere nulla di preciso [...] Anche Raul mi ha lasciato quel giorno. Raul, il primo amico della vita militare [...] E anche Giuanin è morto. Ecco Giuanin, ci sei arrivato a baita. Ci arriveremo tutti. [...] Anche il cappellano del battaglione è morto. [...] E anche il capitano è morto [...] E soldati del mio plotone e del mio caposaldo, quanti ne sono morti quel giorno ?⁸⁷

Seen from the point of view of veterans, such as Rigoni and the other Italian war writers, war is above all a story of victims, since any human being who went through it appears as such.

The idea that war constitutes an utter disaster that can only victimise anyone who is touched by it is at the basis of the sense of universalism that several scholars have praised as one of the main achievements of the literature of the Axis War. A scene that powerfully embodies this conception is located near the end of *Ritorno da Poggio Boschetto*. Stefano Gray’s battalion finds a small cemetery left by the Greeks, where two unknown soldiers have been buried:

Più avanti un gruppo di tumuli più piccolo, e alcune bianche croci di legno. Mi chinai a leggere: ‘Ιταλικός τις’, ‘Ελλήν τις’ – ‘Un Italiano’, ‘Un Greco’. La morte non conosceva amici o

⁸⁶ Langella, ‘Ecce Homo’, in *Scrittori in divisa*, p. 168.

⁸⁷ Rigoni, *Il sergente*, pp. 139-140.

nemici, non conosceva vinti o vincitori: questa era la verità della guerra, questa soltanto.⁸⁸

In the two graves, where they rest side-by-side, the Greek and the Italian soldiers have stopped being enemies and have become equal as casualties of war. This passage promotes a universal understanding of warfare that overcomes divisions and national boundaries and fosters the idea of a common condition that associates all human beings who are at war. This sense of commonality is permitted by death, and is based on the perception that any individual embroiled in warfare constitutes a victim.

The extension of victimhood into an all-encompassing state finds a powerful embodiment in Malaparte's *Kaputt*. In this novel World War II is presented as an ineluctable plague that has contaminated the European continent and that is inevitably leading to the dissolution of its culture.⁸⁹ No one can survive untouched and all living creatures, animals included, become the victims of this process of deterioration.

In Malaparte's account victimhood is presented as a general condition of humankind. This idea is already expressed by the title of the work, as is explained by the protagonist of the story: 'lei conosce l'origine della parola *kaputt*? È una parola che proviene dall'ebraico *koppãroth*, che vuol dire vittima. [...] tutti siamo destinati ad essere un giorno *koppãroth*, vittime, ed essere *kaputt*'.⁹⁰ In the novel, therefore, victimhood becomes the universal state of all Europeans after the disaster of World War II.

⁸⁸ Cecovini, *Poggio Boschetto*, p. 367.

⁸⁹ G. Panella, *L'estetica dello choc: la scrittura di Curzio Malaparte tra esperimenti narrativi e poesia* (Florence: Clinamen, 2014), p. 44; Grana, *Malaparte*, p. 77.

⁹⁰ Malaparte, *Kaputt*, pp. 761-762.

4.4 Suffering

In the preface to the complete collection of Rigoni Stern's war stories, Folco Portinari argues that the volume could be introduced by a verse of Thucydides on the suffering that soldiers experience in warfare: 'uomo per uomo l'armata gemeva in lacrime'.⁹¹ Portinari's comment attests the centrality of the theme of suffering in the writings of Rigoni Stern. This theme, however, is not specific to this author, but constitutes a central aspect of a vast majority of the texts of the main corpus.

Pullini has argued that the literature of the Axis War is charged with a particular power, stemming from the real pains experienced by their authors. He states that these war narratives 'hanno raggiunto forza espressiva e significato di documento collettivo in quanto i loro autori attingevano immediatamente alle fonti della propria sofferenza e trovavano eco nelle esperienze e nelle coscienze di tutti'.⁹² Written by veterans that faced the hardship that war entails, many narratives across the corpus confer prominence on the theme of suffering and establish a close link between this idea and the fact of being at war.

A first strategy contributing to the articulation of this theme consists in presenting the first encounter with war as the discovery of physical pain. At the beginning of *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio* medical Lieutenant Italo Serri, after having listened to an officer's verbose speech on the honour of serving for the fatherland, leaves his regiment and

⁹¹ Portinari, 'Introduzione', in Rigoni Stern, *I racconti di guerra*, pp. xii-xiii.

⁹² Pullini, *Il romanzo italiano*, p. 152.

reaches Bari, from where his unit will soon be shipped to Albania. It is in the harbour of the Southern Italian city that Serri can see for the first time a cohort of wounded soldiers, coming back from the Greek front:

I soldati a qualche passo di distanza osservano in silenzio quella processione di barelle che esce dalla fiancata della nave. Passano uomini immobilizzati dal dolore, paiono salme. Sono i feriti, i congelati, gli ammalati che vengono dal fronte Greco-albanese.⁹³

After the inflated words he listened to before his departure, the group of wounded soldiers represents for Serri the first encounter with the reality of warfare. Thanks to this vision readers can immediately associate warfare with the experience of pain.

A similar link is established in *Ritorno da Poggio Boschetto*, during Stefano Gray's baptism of fire. After the first artillery attack carried out by Gray's unit, the Greeks retaliate and bombard the Italian outpost. The narrative voice expands upon the effects that this bombardment had on the body of a private, soldier Lorenzi:

Improvvisamente Lorenzi sbucò dalla macchia urlando e si gettò a valle di gran corsa col braccio sinistro pendente [...] La scheggia, passando tra il braccio e il torace, gli aveva tranciato il muscolo e il tendine. [...] il braccio gli divenne quasi violaceo ed egli si mise ad urlare per il dolore.⁹⁴

The sight of Lorenzi's pain pushes Gray to compare this moment to the many military exercises he performed before going to war. Hence, the protagonist gravely comments that: 'no, non era proprio lo stesso che una

⁹³ Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. 6.

⁹⁴ Cecovini, *Poggio Boschetto*, p. 273.

scuola di tiro'.⁹⁵ This scene presents, therefore, the experience of pain as one of the factors that distinguishes actual combat from previous practice.⁹⁶

Pirelli's *L'entusiasta* also makes a similar point. While they hike through the mountain, heading towards the front line, Alpine soldier Da Rin and Lieutenant Pietro Andreis have an argument about which road to follow and decide to split up. Da Rin goes on with the hike, while Andreis waits for the end of the night and tries to rest in an outdoor pallet in the middle of the snow. The hardship and the cold, though, make it impossible for him to fall asleep. While he moves and tries to find a comfortable position he suddenly realises that his feet have become completely numb: they are frozen. Andreis thus starts massaging them in the way he was taught at the officer training camp:

Dopo molto fregare, un formicolio si fece sentire all'estremità di uno dei piedi. Concentrò gli sforzi su quel piede. Il formicolio si estese, divenne dolore, un dolore inatteso, fortissimo, lancinante. Questo al corso allievi ufficiali, non gli era stato insegnato: che il sangue fluttuando in un arto congelato, provoca dolori crudeli.⁹⁷

Once again the experience of pain appears as what differentiates the actual war experience from the preconceptions that men had before going to the front. In the army's schools, in the exercises at the boot camps, and in the rhetorical speech of officers under a Fascist dictatorship war is presented in ways that are extremely different from what soldiers

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 273.

⁹⁶ Importantly, in this same scene Cecovini shows that war is also about killing. This aspect will be discussed in the next chapter: see Chapter Five, note 9.

⁹⁷ Pirelli, *L'entusiasta*, p. 74.

actually experience. Many texts stress that one of the main differences is due to the experience of pain.

The importance that suffering has in the representations of the Axis War is proved by the fact that in some cases this idea, similarly to the concept of defeat, can become a metonymy able to sum up the whole war experience. For instance, in Pirro's *Le soldatesse* the war campaigns are re-evoked through the figures of desolated soldiers, who wait for their first leave: 'alcuni avevano subito tutta la guerra e il freddo di Albania, con quello che si era sofferto, dall'ottobre all'aprile ed ancora non avevano visto i loro cari'.⁹⁸ The suffering that the soldiers experienced is the main aspect that the passage highlights in reference to the Italo-Greek war, before the beginning of the occupation.

This metonymic function appears also in Bedeschi's *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio*. When Italo Serri thinks about the war, during a period on leave at home, it is above all the pain of the soldiers that he remembers: 'ripensava a tutti i suoi fanti e ai suoi alpini e ai loro infiniti modi di patire'.⁹⁹ Here again suffering is presented as an essential component of the war experience.

The writings of Bedeschi are undoubtedly those in which the identification between warfare and suffering is most strongly put forward. In his text the experience of pain becomes an all-encompassing trait of the life of the soldiers:

⁹⁸ Pirro, *Le soldatesse*, p. 55.

⁹⁹ Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. 125.

Non era più Albania, intorno a quegli uomini; non era più vita umana nei loro cuori, ma sofferenza assurda come un incubo e vera come il dolore [...] Erano portatori d'armi per ciò soffrivano.¹⁰⁰

For Bedeschi suffering is one with the fact of being at war and becomes a constituent element of the identity of the soldiers. As the entrance into the war is marked by the experience of suffering, so Bedeschi describes its end as the termination of pain: the victory in the Italo-Greek war is, above all, 'un placarsi di sofferenze'; a moment that is contradistinguished by the disappearance of suffering, the pivotal sensation that affects soldiers at war: 'un'allegria semplice e primitiva di gente sopravvissuta spumeggiava ritrovando vie e vene che fino a quel punto parevano inaridite dalla sofferenza'.¹⁰¹

Yet it is above all in the pages on the withdrawal from the River Don that the idea of suffering emerges as one of the most powerful themes of Bedeschi's narrative: those atrocious days are described as an 'agonia', a 'chiuso e lontano mondo di sofferenza', and 'un infinito patire'.¹⁰² For the withdrawing soldiers suffering becomes the only reality, together with the necessity of continuing to walk: 'gli uomini erano ciechi, muti, vivi solamente per il proprio dolore: la vita aveva principio e limite unicamente nel passo'.¹⁰³

The retreat from the Eastern front is indeed the event that contributed to giving centrality to the theme of suffering across the Axis

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 18-19.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁰² Ibid., pp. 280, 282, 320.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 372.

War literature. In all the texts dealing with these tragic days suffering becomes a particularly paramount component of the narratives.¹⁰⁴ La Cauza has pointed out that the literature about this segment of the Axis War 'sfiora i vertici del parossismo nascendo, come si vede, dalla constatazione giorno dopo giorno sempre più profonda dell'abnormità e perciò della gratuità della sofferenza'.¹⁰⁵

For instance, in *Il sergente nella neve*, when the night falls on the steppe, the only palpable reality is constituted by the sorrow of the soldiers: 'non c'erano più le cose, non c'erano più gli uomini, ma solo il lamento degli uomini'.¹⁰⁶ While advancing through the snow the men are desperate because of the excessive pain and distress they have to go through: 'non ne possiamo più, siamo disperati di fatica, di freddo, di fame, di sonno. Le scarpe le abbiamo di vetro sulla neve'.¹⁰⁷

In *La Guerra dei Poveri* a man is driven crazy by the fatigue: 'urla, si scatena come un indemoniato. Gli gridano di allontanarsi. Piange, grida che non ne può più'.¹⁰⁸ Revelli keeps walking but he reaches the limits of his capacity and he is overwhelmed by unbearable pain: 'trascino i piedi nella neve, tanto sono pesanti. Al costato un dolore profondo mi opprime: forse è il cuore. Sento che le forze mi abbandonano'.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ The retreat from the river Don was a massive tragedy. The number of soldiers who were missing after the end of the withdrawal figures to 85,000; among them about 10,000 were sent back to Italy after the war: see Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. 395; Ceva, *Storia delle forze armate*, p. 323.

¹⁰⁵ La Cauza, 'La letteratura della seconda guerra mondiale', in *Il Novecento*, p. 1283.

¹⁰⁶ Rigoni, *Il sergente*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁰⁸ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 68.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 74.

Similarly, in Corti's *I più non ritornano* the narrator continuously underlines the torment caused by the cold of the Russian winter:

Il freddo andava facendosi lancinante: ci sembrava inverosimile essere ancora vivi, dopo averlo sofferto per tante ore [...] Non avvertivamo neppure più il freddo come tale: era qualcosa di micidiale che ci assediava da ogni parte e — facendoci immensamente soffrire — si adoperava per strapparci dalle membra la vita succhiandola fuori.¹¹⁰

In these hard and extreme conditions death may appear almost desirable, since it can bring pain to an end: 'camminavo in mezzo a una distesa di morti. C'era da invidiarli: nella loro rigidità di blocchi di ghiaccio, non sentivano più lo strazio della lotta contro il freddo'.¹¹¹ The centrality of the theme of suffering is reinforced by the conclusion of the book where Corti states that the end of the retreat terminates the story he wanted to tell, but not the suffering caused by the war: 'il mio diario finisce qui, perché qui finiscono i giorni di sacca. Non finirono le sofferenze'.¹¹²

Importantly, across the literature of the Axis War, the idea of suffering also relates to the articulation of the themes of heroism and pacifism. On the one hand, by focusing on the suffering the soldiers had to bear, the texts celebrate the resilience and the physical exceptionality of the Italians. Mondini has argued that this representation generates a new kind of hero 'l'Alpino sofferente, vittima e non più vincitore' characterised

¹¹⁰ Corti, *I più non ritornano*, pp. 39, 43.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 101.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 297.

by phenomenal capacities of resistance and endurance, against the calamities generated by warfare.¹¹³

On the other hand, the continuous emphasis on the unspeakable suffering that the Italians faced reinforces the disapproval of warfare that all the texts of the corpus undertake. As Langella argues in relation to the literature on the Alpine soldiers:

Se c'è un messaggio che sale imperioso da queste pagine, a partire dall'icona dominante dell' 'uomo dei dolori', sfigurato nell'anima e nel corpo dalle ferite spaventose inferte dalla guerra, è proprio quello di una rivolta viscerale contro la logica delle armi, l'appello accorato a coltivare per sempre il bene supremo della pace e della convivenza civile.¹¹⁴

By highlighting the pains that war inevitably generates, the texts develop an utterly negative depiction of it, which contributes to its severe condemnation.

In the development of this anti-war stance, suffering also plays an important role because it offers a common ground for recognising all human beings who are caught up in the war as equal. For instance, in *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio*, when the Italians arrive on the river Don and replace a German division, they are welcomed by a German officer who salutes them as follows: 'Dio voglia risparmiarvi ciò che noi abbiamo sofferto, capitano'.¹¹⁵ Later in the story Russian women are said to help the Italians during the retreat because they are touched by their pain.¹¹⁶ On these two occasions the understanding between people of different

¹¹³ Mondini, *Alpini*, p. 159.

¹¹⁴ Langella, 'Ecce Homo', in *Scrittori in divisa*, p. 180.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 156.

¹¹⁶ Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. 344.

nationalities is made possible by the recognition of their union in the suffering that war generates.

Similarly, in *Il sergente nella neve*, the cry of a Russian man hit by Italian shots leads the Alpine soldiers to recognise in the enemy a fellow human being: 'dalla voce sembrava un ragazzo. Si moveva un poco sulla neve e piangeva. "Proprio come uno di noi" disse un alpino: "Chiama mamma"'.¹¹⁷ In *Giovinezza, Giovinezza*, Italian soldiers share their food with a prisoner because 'si sentivano vicini, nella comune sofferenza della guerra'.¹¹⁸ In *I villaggi bruciano*, when Pompeo is imprisoned in a German POW camp, it is once again in the face of the common experience of suffering that he grasps the equality of all human beings: 'erano gli occhi, i volti, i gesti che parlavan da sé, che testimoniavano la fraternità degli oppressi, l'incoercibile comunione del dolore, il diritto di soffrire insieme'.¹¹⁹

The idea that suffering unites all people who are touched by the war is strongly enhanced by Corti in *I più non ritornano*:

C'era quel freddo. Che continuava a farci soffrire in modo indicibile. Finii un po' alla volta, col non sentirmi più un'unità ben distinta, a me stante: no, ero un atomo dell'Umanità che soffriva, una piccolissima parte dello sterminato dolore umano.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Rigoni, *Il sergente*, p. 40.

¹¹⁸ Preti, *Giovinezza*, p. 284.

¹¹⁹ Nesti, *I villaggi bruciano*, p. 249.

¹²⁰ Corti, *I più non ritornano*, p. 271.

In this passage suffering becomes an all-embracing state that goes beyond the representation of the Axis War and becomes an essential aspect of the human condition.

The idea of a universal form of suffering that is shared by the entirety of humanity also appears in Malaparte's *Kaputt*. Throughout the novel, the evil that war brings into being is embodied in numerous figures of suffering animals, which often play, as Gianni Grana has argued, the role of 'la vittima innocente ed ingannata della guerra voluta dagli uomini'.¹²¹ Among the numerous episodes in which animals are used to communicate the sense of universal grief engendered by warfare, a particularly striking one takes place while Malaparte observes the city of Belgrade being bombarded by the Germans:

E mentre, dalla stanza di un casolare diroccato, io guardavo la luna salire lentamente in cielo [...] s'alzava intorno a me il coro lamentoso dei cani. Nessuna umana voce dolente eguaglia nell'espressione del dolore universale quella dei cani. Nessuna musica, nemmeno la musica più pura, riesce ad esprimere il dolore del mondo quanto la voce dei cani.¹²²

In this scene the barks and the howls of the dogs that rise across the city show, as Grana puts it, 'il dolore e la protesta della natura' and they embody the suffering that, through warfare, humankind inflicts not only on other fellow human beings, but also on animals, on the landscape, and on the world in which they live.¹²³

¹²¹ Grana, *Malaparte*, p 90.

¹²² Malaparte, *Kaputt*, p. 734.

¹²³ Grana, *Malaparte*, p 90.

4.5 Horror

Across the corpus the theme of suffering is also constructed through representations of the many gruesome and appalling episodes of violence that take place during a war. These depictions, while strengthening the association between war and the experience of pain, contribute to the articulation of another theme concerning the horror of warfare.¹²⁴ The formation of this theme is, more than others, affected by the writing style of the various authors, which therefore will be brought into account in the subsequent analysis.

For example, in the works of Rigoni Stern, a writer whom critics have often praised for his sense of moderation, horrific moments come rarely into view.¹²⁵ Rigoni's use of a simple and delicate language leads to the fact that in his war narratives the most excessive and brutal aspects of warfare are not directly represented, but remain on the implicit level of the narrative discourse.¹²⁶

Other authors, instead, do not look away from the appalling events that take place on a battlefield. For instance in *Ritorno da Poggio Boschetto* Stefano Gray observes from a safe and distant outpost on the mountains — the Poggio Boschetto of the title — a small group of Italian

¹²⁴ It is significant that all the scenes of violence that will be analysed never portray the Italians in the role of perpetrators, but always on the receiving end of the act of violence. Hence, these passages also contribute to reinforcing the theme of victimhood.

¹²⁵ On Rigoni's sense of measure see Manacorda, *Vent'anni di pazienza* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1972) p. 399.

¹²⁶ On the simplicity of Rigoni's style see Vittorini's book jacket for the first edition of *Il Sergente nella neve*, now in Vittorini, *I risvolti dei gettoni*, pp. 56-57; G. De Robertis, 'Il sergente nella neve', *Tempo* (6th of June 1953) quoted in Motta, *Rigoni Stern*, p. 70; Bosca, 'Mario Rigoni Stern', in *Scrittori Italiani*, p. 119; Portinari, 'Introduzione', in Rigoni Stern, *I racconti di guerra*, p. xxii.

troops being massacred by Greek machine-guns, after they attempted to assault a nearby enemy position:

Il mortaio procedette indisturbato frugando e battendo rapidamente secondo uno scacchiere prestabilito ogni anfratto della quota. Udii le grida di dolore dei colpiti e vidi volare in aria frammenti di corpi smembrati.¹²⁷

By focusing on the dismemberment of the bodies of the Italian attacking units Cecovini accentuates the corporeality of warfare, the terrible damage that modern weaponry causes to human beings, and the horrific dimension of the war experience.

The attention given to the corporality of the battles can be seen as a result of what Bruno Maier has called Cecovini's 'salda e sicura poetica della realtà' characterised by a prose 'robustamente realistica'.¹²⁸ This style is well epitomised by Cecovini's description of the injured face of an Italian private:

Tra grumi di sangue nero incrostato di sudore e terriccio, apparve prima quello che era stato l'occhio sinistro; uno squarcio sanguinoso che deformava l'intera occhiaia e scopriva un tratto dell'osso frontale. Poi, quasi impercettibilmente apparve il naso, colpito alla radice. Il ferito stringeva le labbra e tremava convulsamente.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Cecovini, *Poggio Boschetto*, pp. 283-284.

¹²⁸ Maier, 'Itinerario narrativo di Manlio Cecovini', in O. H. Bianchi, Cecovini, M. Fraulini, Maier, B. Marin, F. Todeschini, eds., *Scrittori triestini del novecento* (Trieste: Linti, 1968), p. 306; Maier, *La narrativa di Cecovini*, p. 10. See also Maier, *Saggi sulla letteratura triestina del novecento* (Milan: Mursia, 1972), pp. 285-287.

¹²⁹ Cecovini, *Poggio Boschetto*, p. 285.

This accurate and precise description conveys the hardship and pain that the soldiers have to face in a war and contributes to the articulation of a theme of horror in the text.

Two other authors who adopt a realistic way of writing are Corti and Revelli.¹³⁰ In their texts the narrative voice reports several horrific events with a factual dryness that critics have compared to the style of a chronicle.¹³¹ For instance, Revelli roughly compares the dead body of an Alpine soldier that he found in a Russian village to a remnant left on the battlefield after the war has moved forward: ‘un artigliere rovesciato in avanti su un pezzo ha la schiena aperta a ventaglio, aperta, squarciata come quella borraccia che trovai a quota 228’.¹³²

In another passage he describes the direst conditions in which the doctors have to assist the troops: ‘vedo il dottor Taini dietro un’isba, sta amputando il braccio sbrindellato di un alpino con un comune coltello’.¹³³ The same unembellished tone characterises Corti, who reports an event similar to that narrated by Revelli: ‘sia lui che il capitano Ruocco operavano in condizioni raccapriccianti: asportavano a volte gambe e braccia in cancrena con coltelli e con lamette da barba’.¹³⁴

In both texts the peak of horror is reached in the description of an analogous scene, showing the numerous dead bodies of soldiers who have

¹³⁰ A realistic and objective style is indeed characteristic of autobiographies, see Genette, *Fiction and Diction*, pp. 65-67.

¹³¹ E. Elli, ‘La “guerra dei poveri”: gli Alpini in Russia nella testimonianza di Giulio Bedeschi e Nuto Revelli’, in *Scrittori in divisa*, p. 146; M. Apollonio, ‘Campagna di Russia’, *Il popolo* (22th of June, 1947); Felix Morlion, ‘Il neorealismo letterario di Eugenio Corti’, *L’ora dell’azione* (30th of December, 1948). The two latter reviews are now in A. Monti, *Presenza di Eugenio Corti: rassegna della critica* (Milan: Ares, 2010), pp. 95-100.

¹³² Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 80.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 84.

¹³⁴ Corti, *I più non ritornano*, p. 260.

been run over by motorised vehicles. In Revelli the voice of the chronicler is broken by the emotions caused by this uncanny and hideous sight:

Dio che orrore! È il macello del 16 gennaio. Noi eravamo ancora in linea; qui i carri armati russi schiacciavano una colonna in marcia. Ungheresi, tedeschi, italiani, una poltiglia di carne, ossa, vestiti. Non basta farsi forza; gli occhi restano larghi, sbarrati, raccolgono, si riempiono. I più impressionanti sono i senza busto. Il solo tronco è orribile. Chi manca della testa, chi delle gambe, chi ha mezza faccia, chi ha il busto spezzato. E sono in tanti!¹³⁵

In Corti's account the voice of the narrator remains apparently calm, but the frightfulness of the scene is intensified by the almost surreal detail that closes the passage:

Soldati cercavano di fermare gli autocarri sbarrando la strada con le braccia aperte, e gli autisti li investivano, perché un aumento del carico avrebbe potuto impedir loro di ripartire. Un autista ventenne di Como mi raccontò che, in un caso, avendo investito con il suo Bianchi Miles alcuni disperati che gli sbarravano la strada, s'era trovata proiettata in cabina una mano con mezzo avambraccio.¹³⁶

In these two descriptions Corti and Revelli do not shy away from the cruellest aspects of warfare and through their unadorned style they present the experience of horror as a factual component of the war experience.

Yet the two authors that give the most prominence to this theme are Bedeschi and Malaparte. Although their books greatly differ for what concerns stylistic rendering and cultural breadth, these two authors do share a series of common traits. As writers both Bedeschi and Malaparte

¹³⁵ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 57.

¹³⁶ Corti, *I più non ritornano*, p. 179.

have their roots in the Italian 'elzevirismo' and 'prosa d'arte' and were nurtured by cultural influences that predate twentieth century culture.¹³⁷ Moreover, in their war narratives the two reject a dry language that could evoke a sense of factuality in what is narrated and resort, instead, to emphatic statements, embellishments, and hyperboles, in order to convey the excessiveness that characterises warfare. This technique is reflected in the way their texts construct the theme of horror.

Scholars who have worked on Bedeschi have not failed to underline how his writing tends to be excessively verbose and grandiloquent and often overcharged with an emphasis that exceeds the level of good taste; nevertheless, these scholars have also recognized that his style manages to be efficacious and compelling.¹³⁸ A reason for this efficacy relates to the powerful way in which Bedeschi conveys the horror of warfare. As an example one can examine how the writer portrays the case, already considered here, of Italian men run over by enemy tanks:

Nella scia lasciata del carro assaltatore giaceva dilaniato un cadavere; una sola gamba appariva, superstite, da un impasto informe e sanguinolento che all'estremo opposto terminava in un rimescolato tritume di capelli, denti e ossa craniche tenuto insieme da un lucido e gelatinoso cemento di materia cerebrale congelata.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ On Bedeschi see I. Sibaldi, *Come leggere La neve, la pace, la guerra (Centomila gavette di ghiaccio, Il peso dello zaino) di Giulio Bedeschi* (Milan: Mursia, 1979), pp. 25-26; on Malaparte see Orsucci, *Il giocoliere di idee*, pp. 151-156.

¹³⁸ Corni, *Raccontare la guerra*, p. 135; Mondini, *Alpini*, pp. 212-213; Sibaldi, *Come leggere La neve, la pace, la guerra*, pp. 25-27, 56.

¹³⁹ Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. 297.

The description of the mutilated body lingers with sensational emphasis on the most appalling details, evoking a sense of loathing and disgust that cannot leave readers unperturbed.

Horrific sights are consistent and recurrent throughout *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio* and they are powerfully conveyed by Bedeschi's indelicate and often obscene language. For instance, the image of an Italian soldier who has been critically injured in combat becomes in his text an almost nightmarish vision:

Dall'orecchio all'orbita, lungo il naso spappolato e la mandibola, un'unica ferita ha fessurato quel volto [...] Il globo oculare, senza più protezione di palpebre e nudo nell'occhiaia, le ossa del naso emergenti dal sangue raggrumato fra cui scoppiettano orrende goccioline d'aria, la metà del labbro superiore e inferiore spaccati e l'intera guancia avulsa dalla sua sede naturale, l'altra metà del viso abbruciacchiata e contratta offrono nell'insieme la visione d'una agghiacciante maschera uscita da una fantasia demoniaca.¹⁴⁰

The narrative voice persists in describing inch by inch the soldier's face that has been disfigured by the explosion. The accuracy of this depiction reflects both the professional knowledge of the author, who was a doctor, and the point of view of the main character, Italo Serri, medical Lieutenant during the Axis War. Yet, despite the precision of each single part of this portrayal, the progressive accumulation of atrocious details produces, rather than factuality, a sense of elaboration. By resorting to immoderate and redundant descriptions Bedeschi goes beyond realistic depiction, conveying the horrific excessiveness of warfare.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

A similar strategy is pursued by Malaparte. The events he narrates in *Kaputt*, despite stemming from his actual experiences as a war correspondent, are artistically transfigured into what Andrea Orsucci calls 'magiche trasfigurazioni'.¹⁴¹ Throughout the book events that Malaparte saw across many European countries affected by World War II are realistically reported and, at the same time, embroidered with extravagant expressionist fantasies, becoming a series of bewildering, surrealist, and uncanny visions that Giuseppe Panella has defined as 'momenti di puro orrore e, contemporaneamente, di puro lirismo'.¹⁴²

Throughout his long book Malaparte implements this technique with innumerable scenes woven by continuous interconnections — and overturning — of a series of words, motifs, symbols, figures, jokes, and multilingual expressions, that are articulated in various episodes and digressions that resemble, as Grana notes, an 'orchestrazione musicale'.¹⁴³ Although many of these bewildering episodes do not seem to concern the war directly, Biondi argues that all the transfigured visions of *Kaputt* must be related to the war, since they are the result of the sense of extremeness that human beings find in warfare.¹⁴⁴ Thanks to the incredible facts he narrates, Malaparte generates in the readers a sense of distress and horror that powerfully conveys the excessiveness of war. Here a single episode will be considered as an example.

¹⁴¹ Orsucci, *Il giocoliere di idee*, p. 164; On Malaparte's experience as a war correspondent see Laforgia, *Malaparte scrittore di guerra*.

¹⁴² G. Panella, *L'estetica dello choc*, pp. 44-45. Panella has seen in this narrative method an overturning of the poetics of the sublime, which he calls 'estetica dello shock'.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁴⁴ Biondi, *Scrittori e miti totalitari: Malaparte, Pratolini, Silone* (Florence: Polistampa, 2002), p. 89.

The third chapter of *Kaputt* is set in Finland and opens with a short, evocative, and mysterious paragraph: 'quella mattina mi recai con Svartström a veder liberare i cavalli dalla prigionia di ghiaccio'.¹⁴⁵ In the following pages, while readers follow Malaparte walking to lake Lågoda, meeting other characters, and talking about the war, the frozen horses are mentioned six more times, as a refrain; however, no further explanation is added to the initial bewildering statement and the entire episode remains suspended in an atmosphere of unreality.

It is only due to a flashback that readers finally discover what the frozen horses stand for: months before, a herd that was escaping a fire caused by the battle between the Finnish and the Russians happened to cross lake Lågoda in the very moment at which, because of the low winter temperatures, the water froze. This is what the horses look like to the first group of Finnish soldiers who found them:

Un orrendo e meraviglioso spettacolo apparve ai loro occhi. Il lago era come un'immensa lastra di marmo bianco, sulla quale eran posate centinaia e centinaia di teste di cavallo. Parevano recise dal taglio netto di una mannaia. Soltanto le teste emergevano dalla crosta di ghiaccio. Tutte le teste erano rivolte verso la riva. Negli occhi sbarrati bruciava ancora la fiamma bianca del terrore.¹⁴⁶

In this episode the horror of the war is sublimated by Malaparte's imagination into a surreal and uncanny vision: the iced lake is crawling with frozen statues of the horses' heads that maintain in their eyes the fear they felt in the last seconds of their lives. This and other memorable

¹⁴⁵ Malaparte, *Kaputt*, p. 486.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 493.

scenes of the book are able to unsettle the readers and transmit the sense of exceptionality that characterises warfare.

Finally, it must be stressed that, similarly to what has been observed for the theme of suffering, throughout the corpus the articulation of the theme of horror closely relates to the anti-war stance that the texts uphold. Indeed, through the representation of the horrors that take place during a war many of these narratives show their rebuttal of warfare. In many cases this connection remains implicit and it is the reader, who is inevitably repelled by the scenes described, who has to establish it.¹⁴⁷ In some cases, though, the texts openly state this association, as in the following passage by Corti:

Intorno buche di mortaio un po' dappertutto. Marciume sparso. Cadaveri senza più forma umana. Congelati cenciosi che si trascinavano. E appena più in là le fosse dell'infermeria da cui traboccavano le cataste di morti. Ecco la guerra!¹⁴⁸

The final sentence emphatically stresses that the horrifying sights reported by this excerpt relate to the actual essence of warfare, which is made of a series of repeated appalling, horrifying, and gruesome experiences. This example shows that the theme of horror also possesses an ethical value, since it contributes to condemning war and strengthening the pacifist ideas that the Italian literature of the Axis War supports.

¹⁴⁷ This is the meaning that Bedeschi attributes to the use of horror in his own book, see Bedeschi, *Il Natale degli Alpini* (Milan: Mursia, 2003), pp. 18-19.

¹⁴⁸ Corti, *I più non ritornano*, p. 244.

Conclusion

The five themes analysed in this chapter powerfully emerge from the reading of the narratives of the main corpus, being moulded by various elements that recur with frequency across the texts. These themes constitute some of the most evident meanings that Italian literature ascribed to the Axis War and, according to Weinrich's conception of the post-histoire of reading, they represent narrative contents that were likely to be received by the readers and last in their memories.

If these themes are particularly relevant, however, it is not only because of the memory productive power of the literary vectors of memory, but also as a result of their memory reflexive capacity. In fact these themes do not belong simply to the realm of literature, but they have strong ties with the memory discourse developed in Italy in the post war years, as the historical works on the Italian collective memory of World War II can help to indicate.

For instance, Focardi, Ben-Ghiat, Borgomaneri, Patriarca, and Emiliano Perra, have all stressed, in different ways, that innocence has been a widespread and paramount component of the Italian memory narratives of World War II.¹⁴⁹ The construction of this sense of innocence followed a process that resembles quite closely the one that has been described in the texts of the main corpus. Many memory narratives of

¹⁴⁹ Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*, pp. 10, 180; Ben-Ghiat, 'Liberation', in *Italian Fascism*, p. 88; Borgomaneri, 'Introduzione', in *Crimini di guerra*, p. 9; Patriarca, *Italianità*, p. 275; E. Perra, 'Narratives of Innocence and Victimhood: The Reception of the Miniseries Holocaust in Italy', *Holocaust Genocide Study*, 22 (2008), 411-440 (p. 411).

World War II transmitted, through the myth of *Italiani brava gente*, the view that the Italians were, fundamentally and ontologically, good people. This idea, which Rosario Forlenza has defined as 'one of the most powerful self-absolving popular memories of the war', offered a self-exculpatory framework for the understanding of the Italian participation in the war.¹⁵⁰

Moreover, Focardi and Ben-Ghiat show that in the Italian memory discourse responsibility for the Axis War was not foregrounded but displaced, and was generally ascribed to the Germans and to the Fascist component of Italian society.¹⁵¹ In other words, the firm distinction between the Italians and the Germans and the singling out of the Fascist segment of the Italian community facilitated processes of blame transfer toward these two groups, allowing the maintenance of the idea of the innocence of the Italian people.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Forlenza, 'Sacrificial Memory', *History and Memory*, p. 83.

¹⁵¹ Focardi argues that the Italian collective memory fostered a view 'largamente autoassolutoria basata sul paragone costante tra il caso italiano e quello tedesco, e sulla conseguente minimizzazione delle colpe italiane'; Ben-Ghiat, instead, has stressed how often the Italians, when trying to make sense of their past, transferred 'blame for Fascism on to their compatriots', by 'drawing dichotomies within the national self'. Focardi, *La guerra della memoria*, p. 10; Ben-Ghiat, 'Liberation', in *Italian Fascism*, p. 88. See also Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, pp. 202-206.

¹⁵² In the historiographical scholarship surveyed for this research, scholars have highlighted processes of blame transfer towards the Germans and the Fascists, but no one has mentioned the possible implication of a scapegoat mechanism. This concept, instead, has been employed by historians who have worked on the memory of the Civil War. In particular, studies that have investigated the group memories developed in small communities of the Centre-North of Italy, where Nazi massacres took place, have shown that forms of scapegoating, to the detriment of local partisans, have often affected the formation of memory narratives of these events: see Contini, 'Memorie in conflitto', *L'impegno*, 21.2 (2001); Cappelletto, 'Introduction', in *Memory and World War Two*, p. 19; Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, p. 126. Furthermore this mechanism has also been identified in the representation of the Nazi occupation developed by Neorealist cinema: see Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir*, p. 247; Forgacs, *Rome Open City – Roma città aperta* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), p. 66; Ben-Ghiat, 'Liberation', in *Italy and America 1943-1944*, pp. 459-460.

Likewise, the ideas of victimhood and self-victimization strongly affected postwar Italian culture. According to Ben-Ghiat the collective memory of World War II has affirmed 'the portrait of Italians as casualties of war, rather than as its co-belligerents'.¹⁵³ For Schwarz self-victimisation played such an important role in postwar culture that it can be seen as an element that allowed the Italians to organise in a unique framework the diverse experiences that had divided the national community.¹⁵⁴ The idea of Italian victimhood bonded with that of innocence and allowed the diffusion of memory narratives that portrayed the Italians, as Focardi stresses, 'nei panni autoassolutori della vittima, non in quelli moralmente fastidiosi dell'invasore'.¹⁵⁵

Undoubtedly, the formation of a similar memory discourse, centred on the ideas of innocence and victimhood, was also the result of the hardship that the Italians had to face in the last years of the war. After the Allied bombings of many Italian cities and the Allied invasion of the Southern regions, the communication on the 8th of September of the separate surrender that had been signed five days before plunged Italy into chaos.¹⁵⁶ The Nazi occupation that followed made the Italians

¹⁵³ Ben-Ghiat, 'The Secret Histories', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, p. 256. See also Ben-Ghiat, 'Liberation' in *Italian Fascism*, p. 88.

¹⁵⁴ Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir*, p. 270. See also Forlenza, 'Sacrificial Memory', *History and Memory*, p. 78.

¹⁵⁵ Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*, p. 106.

¹⁵⁶ The 8th of September 1943 has been one of the most important — and complex — dates of the Italian history of World War II. Many different events are indeed related to this day, such as the defeat of Italy in the Axis War, the progressive arrest of more than 650,000 Italian soldiers by the Germans, the dissolution of the national state, and the beginning of the organised Resistance. Hence, the memory of this event had a central position in many memory narratives produced by the most diverse sub-groups of the Italian community of memory. The multifaceted perspectives from which this event can be examined also resulted in contrasting historical interpretations. See at least the following works: Aga Rossi, *Una nazione allo sbando: l'armistizio italiano del settembre*

experience forms of violent repression that were comparable to those used by Europeans in the colonies, or on the Eastern front of World War II. These facts, together with the Antifascist struggle that many men and women undertook, often at the cost of their lives, facilitated the repositioning of the Italians, as Schwarz has pointed out, 'come vittima del nazismo al pari delle altre popolazioni europee'.¹⁵⁷

The ideas of suffering and horror, too, occupied a crucial position in the memorialisation of World War II, even though historians of the Italian memory have not usually indicated them as central features of the national memory discourse. Nevertheless, the centrality of these two concepts and their wide circulation in the postwar years across memory narratives related to the war can be inferred by considering the evolution of the conception of warfare in Italy and in Europe as a whole.

Historian James Sheehan has argued that in the decades after the end of World War II Western Europe was affected by a progressive 'eclipse of violence' that, by the end of the century, transformed this part of the world into a 'non-war community'.¹⁵⁸ This transformation was based on a cultural shift concerning the way the phenomenon of war was interpreted and understood.¹⁵⁹ With specific reference to the Italian

1943 (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993); E. Galli della Loggia, *La morte della patria: la crisi dell'idea di nazione tra Resistenza, antifascismo e Repubblica* (Rome: Laterza, 1996); Isnenghi, 'La polemica sull'8 settembre e l'origine della Repubblica', in Collotti, ed., *Fascismo e antifascismo: rimozioni, revisioni, negazioni*, pp. 241-272. On the Italian prisoners of war after the 8th of September see Rochat, 'La prigionia di guerra', in *I luoghi della memoria: strutture ed eventi*, pp. 398-402.

¹⁵⁷ Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir*, p. 268.

¹⁵⁸ Obviously Sheehan's analysis concern only the inter-states war fought on the European soil, Sheehan, *The Monopoly of Violence*, pp. 223.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. xiii-xx. See also Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir*, pp. 222-223; Mondini, *Alpini*, p. 226.

context, Oliver Janz and Lutz Klinkhammer have shown that the language, the symbols, and the rituals with which war was addressed after World War II marked a deep breach with the pro-war culture — what George Mosse calls the 'Myth of the War Experience' — that had traditionally characterised the public discourse since the phase of nation-building of the nineteenth century.¹⁶⁰ Military values, heroism, honour and glory progressively lost importance and were replaced by a widespread disapproval of warfare.¹⁶¹

This transformation was highly connected to the collective memory of World War II.¹⁶² The tragic memories that this second world conflict engendered conferred new strength and momentum on the pacifist and internationalist ideals that had flourished after the Great War. The memory narratives that, through the decades, circulated across European societies contributed to giving prominence to an unfavourable view of warfare that, by the end of the century, reached in Europe a prevailing position.

Hence, a complex interplay can be traced between the texts of the main corpus and the culture in which they were written. The

¹⁶⁰ O. Janz, L. Klinkhammer, 'La morte per la patria in Italia: un percorso secolare', in Janz, Klinkhammer, eds., *La morte per la patria: la celebrazione dei caduti dal Risorgimento alla Repubblica* (Rome: Donzelli, 2008), p. ix. On the 'myth of the war experience' and its transformation after the end of World War II see G. L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 201-211.

¹⁶¹ Mondini has stressed that this transformation was obviously progressive and affected society at large mainly during the 1960s, Mondini, 'Il racconto della sconfitta: stagioni e mappe tematiche nella letteratura di guerra dell'Italia repubblicana', in G. Mariani, ed., *Fictions: studi sulla narrativa: Narrazioni della distruzione: scrivere la seconda guerra mondiale* (Pisa; Rome: Fabrizio Serra, 2014), pp. 73-74.

¹⁶² Sheehan, *The Monopoly of Violence*, pp. 223-224. See also Casadei, *Romanzi di Finisterre*, p. 20.

paradigmatic shift on the conception of warfare influenced the ways in which postwar Italian authors approached their war experience. At the same time, the Italian texts — especially those written in the 1950s, a phase that can be seen as a transition from a heroic interpretation of warfare to a post-heroic one — contributed to moulding this new conception and cementing it further, by conveying to their public a firm condemnation of war through representations centred on the ideas of suffering and horror.

Finally, it must be noted that the theme of defeat represents a somewhat different case. While the texts of the main corpus consistently and unanimously convey this idea, in Italian culture the construction and circulation of a sense of defeat after World War II was much more complex and ambiguous.

On the one hand, events such as the 8th of September 1943, the withdrawal from Soviet Russia, and the lost battle of El Alamein, together with the struggle the Italian army had experienced against as weak a country as Greece, generated memory narratives that contributed to giving relevance to this idea. World War II debacles were connected to the many defeats that are part of the Italian national history, reinforcing the image of the unmilitary nature of the Italian people.¹⁶³

On the other hand, though, the memory narratives of the defeats of the Axis War had only a marginal position within the Italian memory discourse, which was centred, instead, on the Italian Civil War. The

¹⁶³ Isnenghi, 'La polemica sull'8 settembre', in *Fascismo e Antifascismo*, pp. 241-242. See M. Patricelli, *L'Italia delle sconfitte: da Custoza alla ritirata di Russia* (Rome: Laterza, 2016).

change of alliance that followed Italy's surrender, the state of co-belligerency that Italy obtained in October 1943, and the formation of Antifascist and partisan movements meant that in 1945 segments of the Italian population ended World War II on the side of the victors. Hence, dominant memory narratives that circulated in postwar Italy overlooked the idea of the country's defeat, focused on the liberation from Fascism and Nazism, and conveyed the idea that what had been defeated was, rather than the Italian nation, the Fascist component of the Italian society.¹⁶⁴

Therefore, within the memory discourse developed in Italy in the postwar years, the idea of defeat appeared in ambivalent and contrasted terms. Hence, its straightforward and unambiguous thematisation across many texts of the main corpus constitutes a peculiar feature of the vectors of memory of the Axis War. The centrality that Italy's vanquishing acquires in these narratives can be seen as the main point of departure between the literature of the Axis War and the Italian memory discourse of World War II.

The five literary themes analysed in this chapter offer further examples of forms of repetition that characterise the texts of the main corpus. With the only exception of the theme of defeat, they constitute textual contents that have strong ties with the memory discourse promoted in postwar Italy. The study of these themes shows once more

¹⁶⁴ Oliva, *L'alibi della resistenza*, pp. 83-85. This perspective has been backed up by historians, even in recent years. For instance Corni writes that thanks to the Resistance 'l'Italia era uscita vittoriosa dalla guerra', Corni, *Raccontare la guerra*, p. 13.

the memory reflective function of the literary vectors of memory and their potential to convey memory narratives to readers.

Chapter 5: Dealing with Guilt: Masterplots of Sacrifice and Conversion

'Vorremmo che quelli che hanno faticato, sofferto,
resistito per una causa che è sempre santa, quando fa soffrire,
uscissero dalla prova come quasi da un lavacro: più puri, tutti.
E quelli che muoiono, almeno quelli, che fossero ingranditi,
santificati; senza macchia e senza colpa'.¹

Introduction

The analysis of the main themes of the corpus has shown that the prevailing representations developed by the literature of the Axis War present the Italians as blameless and innocent people, victims of a lost war that they fought with courage, while bearing terrible suffering and facing unspeakable horrors. This overbearing depiction, though, does not imply that no passages across the corpus touch upon the ideas of the Italian use of violence and upon guilt.

Sections One and Two of this chapter will explore these two issues. The study will show that in the literature of the Axis War Italian violence tends to be removed and guilt tends to be dismissed. In order to underscore the full scope of this process, the second part of the chapter will raise the analysis of the texts of the corpus to a further level of complexity. Indeed, sections Three and Four will focus on the plots of the narratives, or, to use James Phelan's terminology, on their 'narrative progression', meaning the 'movement of a narrative from beginning to

¹ R. Serra, *Esame di coscienza di un letterato* (Cesena: Historica Edizioni, 2015), p. 10.

end, and the principles governing that movement'.² It will be shown that the plots of many of these war narratives are deeply involved in the nullification of the idea of the Italian guilt.

The analysis will identify two typified patterns of narrative progression that shape the narrativisation of the Axis War in Italian literature. These recurrent plots will be addressed through Abbott's notion of 'masterplots'. A masterplot constitutes the essential kernel of a story, a backbone that operates as a structuring force within a much more complex narrative. Abbott defines it as a 'recurrent skeletal stor[y], belonging to cultures and individuals that [plays] a powerful role in questions of identity, values, and the understanding of life'.³ According to Abbott masterplots have strong ties with the culture to which they belong; they recur in different narrative versions and often 'work in secret, influencing us without our wholly realizing it'.⁴

Sections Three and Four investigate the formation of the masterplots of sacrifice and conversion across the texts of the corpus. These typified narrative patterns constitute a further example of forms of repetition that characterise the literature of the Axis War. The conclusion will link the formation of these two plots with the Italian collective memory of World War II and will highlight how these masterplots can be seen as signs of the extremely prominent role that Christian iconography had in reshaping Italian post-Fascist identity.

² Phelan, *Reading People Reading Plot*, p. 15.

³ As examples of masterplots Abbott names, for instance, the quest, the story of revenge, and the story of a thwarted love, Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, pp. 236, 47, 127.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

5.1 The Removal of Violence

The literature of the Axis War, with the emphasis it places on the suffering of the soldiers and the acknowledgement that all human beings involved in war are victims, may allow readers almost to forget a simple fact that Bourke has powerfully stressed in the opening line of her study on war: 'the characteristic act of men at war is not dying, it is killing'.⁵ War is first of all about killing other people, and the horror, suffering, and pains it generates are only consequences of this primal fact.

The literature of the Axis War cannot hide this fundamental aspect of warfare and across the corpus Italian soldiers are shown, at times, killing other men. For instance in *Il sergente nella neve* a long scene in the first part of the book shows Rigoni and his companions engaging Russian units who are trying to conquer the Italian outpost on the river Don. During this defensive operation many Russian soldiers are killed:

Ricominciammo a sparare. Non si fermarono questa volta, né ritornarono indietro. Molti ne caddero sotto la scarpata, molti. Gli altri venivano avanti gridando 'Urrà! Urrà' ma pochi riuscivano ad avvicinarsi ai nostri reticolati.⁶

Scenes like this, in which the Italians kill enemies during a battle, are not innumerable, but can be found throughout the corpus. What characterises these depictions, however, is a certain degree of reluctance to show the Italians in the actual moment of killing.

⁵ Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-century Warfare* (London: Granta, 1999), p. xiii.

⁶ Rigoni, *Il sergente*, p. 50.

For instance, in *Jovanka e le altre*, when two women of Jovanka's partisan squad are killed in a skirmish against Italian soldiers, the fact is described without stressing the Italian responsibility: 'una raffica di mitra falciò Marjia: una ferita atroce, dall'alto in basso, dal ventre alla gola. Poi un colpo di pistola, forse sparato a casaccio dal tenente medico, freddò Mira'.⁷ In this account the Italians doubtlessly kill, but their agency is underplayed. The death of the first woman is attributed to the firing of a weapon, rather than to the soldier who opens fire; the second, instead, is due to a bullet that the Italian Lieutenant almost did not want to shoot and that hit the woman only by chance.

Similarly when in *Ritorno sul Don* a young Alpine soldier ends up face to face with an enemy, during an attack carried out in the summer of 1942, it is only an order screamed by his Lieutenant that pushes him to do what has to be done:

Vide il soldato russo con le braccia in alto e l'alpino di fronte che, come imbambolati, si sorridevano: 'Spara! Sparagli, cretino!' gli gridò il tenente. 'Sparagli'. Capirono tutti e due, il russo e l'alpino, e si guardarono attorno smarriti. L'alpino sparò.⁸

In this passage an act of violence, which is an everyday reality of warfare, is ascribed to the Italian soldier with a strong sense of resistance, and the man seems to perform it with no will or conviction. Through such depictions the idea of the inherently good nature of the Italians is indirectly re-affirmed, since the moment of killing is presented as an

⁷ Pirro, *Jovanka*, p. 42.

⁸ Rigoni, *Ritorno sul Don*, pp. 174-175.

exception, as a war necessity that the Italians do not like to perform and try to avoid as much as possible.

Yet in a vast majority of cases Italian violence is not depicted even in these reluctant ways, but is only implicitly suggested through the use of the language of silence. For example, in *Ritorno da Poggio Boschetto*, in the previously mentioned episode of Gray's baptism of fire, the officer is struck by the sight of an enemy hit by the artillery he commands:

Altri quattro colpi scoppiarono immediatamente dopo nel campo del mio binocolo e scorsi uno dei fuggitivi piegarsi sui ginocchi, cadere, rialzarsi con fatica e trascinarsi verso un albero. Abbassai il binocolo. Ordinai il cessate il fuoco. Avevo lo stomaco stretto da un crampo e il cervello vuoto: avevo colpito un uomo. Un nemico, un uomo.⁹

This passage, while constituting one of the rare occasions in which the Italians are shown striking the enemy and reflecting on their actions, does not appear to portray an act of killing. Indeed, after being hit by the Italian shells, the Greek soldier manages to stand up and find shelter near a tree, giving the impression that he has only been injured. Gray speaks about having struck a man — ‘avevo colpito un uomo’ — an expression that may euphemistically stand for having actually killed him. However, the Greek soldier disappears into a permanent gap in the text and his fate remains unclear.

Later in the story, Gray takes part in an assault against an isolated outpost: the enemy's position is first bombed and then conquered. Gray

⁹ Cecovini, *Poggio Boschetto*, p. 271. Importantly, this scene conveys the idea that if actual combat differs from the practice of the boot camp it is not only due to the experience of pain, but also to the striking and killing of other people.

enters into the trenches and this time he openly reports that none of the enemies survived the attack. Yet the narrator chooses not to show the dead bodies, which are covered by a cataphasis: 'i nostri piedi calpestavano qualche cosa di molle che non volli guardare'.¹⁰ The mention of an imprecise pulpy substance allows the readers to understand that the trench is full of the dismembered bodies of the enemies without directly showing them. The Greek dead remain in the implicit portion of the text and the horror and repugnance that this sight implies is conveyed in an indirect way. This choice greatly differs from previously discussed episodes in which Cecovini represents the violence the Italians are subject to in precise ways, by depicting their bodily injuries in a realistic language.

In the last two examples Cecovini uses the language of silence to keep the Italian acts of killing within an implicit dimension. This indirect representation does not gloss over the fact itself, but it deprives it of its most violent aspects. This constitutes a consistent feature of the literature of the Axis War in which the language of silence is constantly applied to tame the representations of the war actions carried out by the Italians. This phenomenon will now be illustrated in the texts on the Russian campaign, which offer numerous and significant exemplifications of this process.

A rhetorical device that is often deployed to underplay Italian violence is the euphemism. For instance, when in *Il sergente nella neve*,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 340.

Rigoni's unit is sent to conquer a Russian izba from which a group of enemies is shooting, the action is narrated as follows: “Andate in quella casa e fatela finita” ci dice. Noi andiamo e i russi se ne vanno’.¹¹ The passage restricts itself to reporting the positive outcome of the assault; in this way the violence of the moment remains covered by a gap and the flight of the enemy overlooks the fact that some of them have been probably killed. Similarly, in *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio*, during a harsh defensive operation of the trenches on the river Don, the killing of Russian assailants is understated by the use of verbs such as 'arrestarsi', 'cadere', and 'abbattersi' in place of dying and being killed.¹²

Likewise, in *I più non ritornano*, the narrator reports a day he spent fighting against the Soviets with a sniper gun: ‘scorgevo di tanto in tanto un nemico che si spostava laggiù tra le casette: prendevo la mira con rapidità e insieme con cura, e facevo fuoco. Colpivo? Sparivano’.¹³ Corti does not state openly that he is actually killing the enemies, but euphemistically uses the verb 'sparire', which keeps open the possibility that the Soviet soldiers run away.

The most common way in which violence is silenced, however, is through the use of summaries. For instance, in *I più non ritornano* at one point the narrator reports that ‘gli attacchi alla baionetta [...] avevano ormai raggiunto il massimo dell’intensità, forse anche lo avevano superato, perché il nemico, pur combattendo, ripiegava e fuggiva da ogni

¹¹ Rigoni, *Il sergente*, p. 138.

¹² Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. 245.

¹³ Corti, *I più non ritornano*, p. 85.

parte'.¹⁴ In this summary the violence of the battle is openly evoked through references to bayonet attacks and to the intensity of the fighting; yet this harsh combat is not directly shown, but narrated through a summary that does not convey the most violent details of what happened.

Similarly, in *La guerra dei poveri* the majority of scenes in which the Italians attack Russian villages are encapsulated in short phrases such as the following: 'muoviamo verso un abitato, lo rastrelliamo, lo superiamo'.¹⁵ In this summary the narrative discourse accelerates, various gaps open up, and the violence of the war action disappears.

In Bedeschi's *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio* some of these summaries are so short that the violence involved vanishes almost completely. For instance, during the war against Greece the narrator relates the difficult resistance of a group of Alpine soldiers who, thwarted by the extreme weather conditions, the disorganisation of the command, and the deficient weaponry, 'difendevano i mortai e i pezzi con le baionette'.¹⁶ Later, an important war action during the retreat from the Soviet Union is summed up in the sentence 'l'attacco venne sferrato deciso e violento'.¹⁷ Both passages address moments of extreme violence, entailing face-to-face fighting with bayonets. Yet this violence, albeit openly stated, remains implicit, as it is not shown in narrative scenes, but summarised in just a few words.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁵ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 54.

¹⁶ Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. 111.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 339.

In other cases violence disappears into textual gaps that are opened by paralipses. In fact, across the texts of the Russian campaign many acts of killing committed by the Italians take place outside the area of focalisation of the stories. For instance, during an assault in *Ritorno sul Don*, Rigoni notices that the gunfire coming from a Russian trench suddenly ceases and thus he explains: 'forse, da dietro, erano già arrivati i fucilieri di Moscioni'.¹⁸ The enemies in the trench were killed by the unit commanded by Moscioni Negri. This moment of violence, however, remains outside the visible texture of the narrative discourse, since the focalisation is kept on Rigoni's point of view.

In many cases only the dead bodies of the enemy attest to the Italian use of violence. For instance, in *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio*, after a summary reporting a combat that lasted through the night, which glosses over the violence involved, the narrator adds that: 'agli sguardi stanchi degli alpini l'alba svelò innanzi alle trincee lo spettacolo di centinaia di russi inerti sulla neve'.¹⁹ The presence of these corpses allows readers to grasp the violence of the Italian acts of war, even though the killings are not directly shown.

Yet in the majority of cases in which a paralipsis is used to conceal the Italian killing, the textual hint that refers to this implicit violence is not as evident as in Bedeschi's scene. For instance, in *I più non ritornano*, the narrator encounters many corpses while advancing in the snow: 'proseguì. Nell'intera vallata, là dove l'attacco era passato, il terreno era

¹⁸ Rigoni, *Ritorno sul Don*, p. 173.

¹⁹ Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. 246.

seminato di morti, in prevalenza nostri'.²⁰ In this passage the author gives emphasis to the presence of Italian dead bodies, minimizing the presence of those of the enemy, which reveal the acts of killing committed by the Italians before the autodiegetic narrator arrived on the place.

Sometimes these textual clues are so minimal that they become rather difficult to detect and may go almost unnoticed. For instance, when Revelli enters a Russian village, only a brief reference to a Russian corpse attests to the attack that took place before his arrival: 'cerco il comando di battaglione, passo da un'isba all'altra, scavalco un partigiano morto, trovo finalmente gli ufficiali del Tirano in una stanza'.²¹ The body of the partisan, which Revelli overtakes casually, is the only sign of the violence of the Italian assault.

All these examples show that through the use of euphemisms, summaries, and paralipses the texts of the Russian campaign avoid a direct representation of the acts of violence committed by the Italians during the retreat. These moments of violence, though, are not completely removed, but remain confined in the implicit realm of the narratives, and readers can grasp their presence thanks to a series of textual hints.

It is important to assess what type of silence such representation produces. Generally speaking, scholars argue that implicit depictions are used to convey a message in subtler, sometimes even stronger, ways, generating what this thesis has called a transitive silence. The narratives considered here, though, do not seem to comply with this use of implicit

²⁰ Corti, *I più non ritornano*, p. 89.

²¹ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 55.

representations, since they present too strong imbalances in the way they interweave the implicit and explicit elements of their narrative discourses.

In fact, all these narratives deploy the topos of the Good Italian and articulate the themes of innocence, suffering, and victimhood; moreover, when dealing with the violence that the Italians have been subject to, or when it comes to denouncing the cruelty of the Germans, Corti, Revelli, and Bedeschi have no problems in indulging in macabre, straightforward, and detailed descriptions. The presence of these explicit elements minimises the impact that an implicit elusive depiction of Italian violence can have. Furthermore, the texts — with only few exceptions, such as the passage in Bedeschi's *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio* on the sight of Russian dead bodies discovered at dawn — do not draw the attention of the readers to the hints related to this implicit representation, but rather divert it from them. As a result, the silence produced by these narratives should be considered as having an intransitive function.

This interpretation is backed up by the fact that in the same texts many cases of Italian violence are not even represented in implicit ways, but remain confined in permanent gaps in the narratives. This is the case of the many short passages that refer to military operations that took place during the invasion of the Soviet Union. For example, at the beginning of *I più non ritornano*, Corti refers to the assaults that took place before the beginning of the retreat by mentioning 'colpi di mano

notturni da una parte e dall'altra'.²² However, nothing is said about these operations carried out by the Italian army, which remain confined in passages of zero-texture.

In *Il sergente nella neve*, when Rigoni encounters a group of soldiers belonging to the 'Cervino' battalion, he mentions that it was 'il battaglione con il quale avevo partecipato a un'azione dell'inverno precedente'.²³ This brief comment refers to some unknown war action carried out by Italian troops in the winter 1941-1942, but Rigoni does not add anything about it. In *Ritorno sul Don* he returns to the period he spent in the Cervino, and readers find the same euphemistic expression used by Corti: 'di notte si facevano pattuglie e colpi di mano'.²⁴ The formula 'colpi di mano' is the only hint that refers to the military actions in which Rigoni was involved.²⁵

The removal of violence is a phenomenon that permeates the totality of the corpus. If this analysis has used the texts of the Russian campaign as its main case study, this is due to the fact that these narratives relate one of the most dramatic — and therefore most violent — experiences undertaken by the Italian army during World War II; hence, compared to other narratives they present more passages in which the violence of warfare emerges, at least at the implicit level. In many other texts Italian violence is not even represented in implicit ways, but

²² Corti, *I più non ritornano*, p. 21.

²³ Revelli, *Il sergente*, p. 72.

²⁴ Rigoni, *Ritorno sul Don*, p. 284.

²⁵ The only operation that Rigoni reports in detail about this period concerns the dismantlement of industrial materials, *Ritorno sul Don*, p. 184. Corni has, however, stressed that Italian soldiers in that phase were also involved in anti-partisan operations, Corni, 'Italy after 1945', in *The Legacies of Two World Wars*, p. 259.

remains confined in permanent gaps, is externalised onto the Germans and the Fascists, and is negated by dominant topoi and themes.²⁶

The fact that the Italian writers chose to cover and screen the violent actions committed by their side is not strange in itself. Bourke has pointed out that in war narratives and oral testimonies similar deeds are often glossed over and denied.²⁷ Yet, in her analysis of British and American war memoirs she has also shown that the opposite case is equally possible, with certain writers choosing to emphasise the moment in which they had to kill. She notes that ‘despite the statistical insignificance of face-to-face killing, such stories were of immense personal importance with combatants constantly emphasizing — and exaggerating — any rare moments of intimate killing’.²⁸ Similarly, Portelli, who has studied the ways in which Italian partisans have remembered their acts of violence, shows that for some of these men these deeds constituted a fundamental part of their war experience and, therefore, in the accounts they gave they tended to reclaim, emphasise, and in some cases even invent the violence they committed.²⁹

Moreover, it is important to note that in a war not all acts of killing are the same, nor do they have the same effects on the consciences and memories of soldiers. Bourke makes a distinction between ordinary

²⁶ The texts that will be discussed in the Epilogue represent an exception as they let Italian violence emerge in more visible ways.

²⁷ Bourke, *Intimate History of Killing*, p. xiv.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

²⁹ Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison, Wis.; London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 138.

killing and unlawful uses of violence.³⁰ She stresses that martial combat must be set apart from murder, since the ordinary forms of killing that soldiers commit in a war, as part of a hierarchical interdependent structure, takes place within a collective framework that allows people to kill.³¹

This form of ordinary killing has to be differentiated from the most brutal atrocities that may occur in a war, which constitute forms of unlawful violence. This difference is obviously nuanced, and it is not simple to assess what represents an atrocity in a war. Nonetheless, Bourke claims that actions such as ‘the gratuitous slaughter of unarmed people’ have been commonly accepted as wrong.³²

Importantly, although the fact of having killed during wartime, in whatever form, remains a burdensome deed, Bourke shows that for many veterans actions carried out within the military framework appear legitimate and are more easily accepted and rationalised. By contrast, it is especially the unlawful use of violence that becomes problematic and difficult to integrate in retrospective narratives.³³

What appears striking in the case of the Italian literature of the Axis War, therefore, is not the fact that in many passages violence has been silenced; but that this choice has been applied with consistency across so many texts of the corpus, even to cases of ordinary wartime killings.

³⁰ Bourke, *Intimate History of Killing*, pp. 200-202.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. xix.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 202.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

Yet Bourke can help explain this fact. She argues, indeed, that if ordinary killing generally appears legitimate it is because these acts of violence are the result of a series of orders that were 'handed down by a legitimate authority'.³⁴ In the case of the Axis War the political entity that justified the Italian war actions was the Fascist regime, a political authoritarian power that in the postwar years was condemned and seen as non-legitimate.

With the breach with Fascism democratic Italy censured the wars of aggression that the regime had waged and denied that they were carried out in the name of the Italian nation, depriving in this way the Italian acts of violence committed during the Axis War of any political and moral support.

As a consequence of that the distinction between legitimate killing and unlawful violence became extremely blurred and even the ordinary forms of violence, which are usually accepted by soldiers, became problematic, and appeared illegitimate. This affected the way the literature of the Axis War represented the Italian acts of violence, which, since they were perceived as non-legitimate, were generally silenced and confined in gaps.

If cases of ordinary violence have been consistently omitted, it is not surprising that forms of unlawful violence have gone through an even more severe form of censorship. In fact, in the texts of the main corpus the Italians are never represented as perpetrators of war crimes. In the books

³⁴ Ibid., p. 213.

on the retreat from the Eastern front, there are scenes that implicitly allude to such actions; however, the moment of killing is never represented and readers cannot tell exactly what happened and whether the Italians hold any responsibility.

For instance, in *I più non ritornano*, when Corti eventually abandons a Russian village where the retreating Axis troops have camped for three days, he notes that 'il paese era distrutto, molte isbe bruciate, e molti civili, vecchi, donne, bambini, uccisi dalla battaglia o dall'odio dei tedeschi'.³⁵ The passage openly highlights German liability for the killing of unarmed civilians, while failing to mention the Italian role in it, which is euphemistically covered by the impersonal reference to the battle.

In the majority of cases, it is through the use of paralipses that forms of unlawful violence are kept outside the area of representation. These deeds always happen before the arrival of the protagonist and, in this way, questions of agency remain unanswerable. For example, at one point during the retreat Corti enters a house and finds the body of an old man:

Uno spettacolo miserando: sul pavimento di una stanza, un gigantesco vecchio dalla lunga barba biancastra giaceva cadavere in un lago di sangue. Nel corridoietto che collegava il locale del morto col rustico vestibolo da cui provenivo, stavano rincantucciate contro un muro, con gli occhi sconvolti dal terrore, tre o quattro donne e cinque o sei bambini [...] In piedi davanti a loro, presso un tavolo su cui c'erano dei recipienti agresti, un soldato [italiano] stava tranquillamente mangiando patate cotte.³⁶

³⁵ Corti, *I più non ritornano*, p. 144.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 96-97.

The text does not clarify whether the Italian soldier entered the house in search of food and, in the same way as the narrator, found the Russian already dead, killed by someone else, or if he actually killed him. Matters of agency remain dubious and unexplored.

Similarly, several passages of *La guerra dei poveri* incidentally report civilians who have been killed; however these deeds always happen outside the area of representation, before the arrival of the protagonist who, then, simply records what he sees through brief description: 'numerosi anche i civili e i partigiani accoppiati, fra le isbe'.³⁷

At another point:

Qua e là per i sentieri, macchie nere, civili e partigiani accoppiati. Ogni isba ha i suoi morti. [...] Nella nostra isba c'è un vecchietto, miracolosamente risparmiato da chi ci ha preceduti.³⁸

In this excerpt the agency behind the killing is generally ascribed to 'those who came before' and, therefore, it is not possible to tell who among Italians, Hungarians, Romanians, and Germans is precisely responsible for the murders.

In another scene Revelli witnesses the invasion of a village, but even in this case the representation follows a similar pattern: 'tedeschi, ungheresi, sbandati italiani attraversano il villaggio, vanno avanti. Fra le isbe, qua e là, partigiani e civili accoppiati'.³⁹ An ellipsis takes place

³⁷ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 57.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 69.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

between the entrance of the Axis contingent into the village and its departure, and a gap covers the moment in which the civilians are killed.

In *Il sergente nella neve*, too, the agency related to war crimes remains blurred. At one point Rigoni finds the bodies of several civilians killed in front of their houses:

Passando per un villaggio vediamo dei cadaveri davanti agli usci delle isbe. Sono donne e ragazzi. [...] Una donna è nuda sulla neve, più bianca della neve e vicino le neve è rossa. Non voglio guardare, ma loro ci sono anche se io non guardo. Una giovane è con le braccia aperte [...] Ma perché questo? Chi è stato? E si continua a camminare.⁴⁰

This time Rigoni asks questions about the perpetrators of this murder, but his query remains unanswered and matters of responsibility unresolved. For sure, retreating soldiers of the Axis contingents who arrived in the village before Rigoni killed the Russian civilians. However, it is not possible to tell precisely who holds responsibility.

Similarly, when in *Ritorno sul Don* Rigoni describes the discovery of a mass grave, issues of culpability remain unclear:

Un giorno ci imbattemmo in una grande fossa ricolma di cadaveri nudi di ogni età e sesso. Restammo sconvolti e quando un tenente volle ritornare su quel posto con la macchina fotografica, trovò le fosse coperte con terra e neve.⁴¹

The mass grave is the site of a war crime committed on the Eastern front. However, the text neither tells what happened, nor investigates who is responsible for such an act.

⁴⁰ Rigoni, *Il sergente*, 117.

⁴¹ Rigoni, *Ritorno sul Don*, p. 184.

In all these scenes the Italians, as part of the Axis Powers, appear as possible perpetrators of such killings. This eventuality, however, remains only a possibility, since clear culpability is never ascribed nor discussed. As a result of the lack of clarity, the various war crimes that are reported in the texts appear as a general outcome of the brutality of warfare, rather than the consequences of precise acts for which someone should be held accountable.

This state of unresolvable uncertainty, which makes it impossible to tell who holds responsibility for the war crimes, is embodied in the questions that the protagonist of *Jovanka e le altre* raises when she investigates a mass murder carried out in a village:

Jovanka fu la prima a sospettare che tutti gli abitanti del villaggio fossero stati trucidati e seppelliti forse solo poche ore prima del loro arrivo. [...] ‘Chi li ha uccisi?’ disse Jovanka. ‘Gli italiani? I tedeschi? I partigiani? I demobrancanti? Gli ustascia?’ [...] Jovanka non stava ferma, frugava dappertutto alla ricerca di un indizio che svelasse il nome degli uccisori, ma tutto fu inutile.⁴²

In this passage the Italians appear among the many parties who could be suspected of having committed the massacre. This potential and unproven responsibility represents the most extreme and precise accusation that the literature of the Axis War is able to make against the Italian army.

⁴² Pirro, *Jovanka*, p. 30.

5.2 Moments of Guilt

In order to examine the ways in which guilt is addressed by the texts of the main corpus, it is first of all necessary to develop categories for the conceptualisation and discussion of such a complex concept. This study is informed by Karl Jasper's 1947 *Die Schuldfrage*, written as a reflection on the issue of German guilt for Nazism. In this work Jasper differentiates four types of guilt, which he calls 'criminal', 'moral', 'political', and 'metaphysical'.⁴³

'Criminal guilt' relates to wrongdoings that are censured by a pre-existing code of laws. This type of guilt has an inherently individual agency, since people can be found criminally guilty only in relation to an act they have personally done.⁴⁴ Similarly to this first category, 'moral guilt' also relates to actions that a person has personally committed; however, in this case, there is no pre-existing code of laws stating the nature of the crime, but the sense of guilt depends on the conscience of an individual in conversation with others.⁴⁵

'Political guilt' concerns, instead, the deeds committed by a community, and in the name of the community, to which a person is bound. Jasper argues that group members may not have committed crimes personally and feel morally guiltless, but nonetheless they have to 'bear the consequences of the deeds' committed by the communities to

⁴³ K. Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), pp. 25-27.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 25-26.

which they belong, and by 'the state whose power governs' them and under whose order they live.⁴⁶ Political guilt is therefore a collective form of guilt in the sense that, despite being perceived by an individual, is due to actions that have been carried out by a collective group with which that person identifies and in which that person lives.

Finally, 'metaphysical guilt' is a form of guilt based on the existential ties that link human beings to one another. Jaspers argues that in the face of an act of violence made against a fellow individual, all the rest of humanity shares a form of metaphysical responsibility, especially if something could have been done to prevent that crime.⁴⁷

Jasper's categories, despite having being developed to discuss German responsibility at the end of World War II, try to address the idea of guilt in a general and abstract dimension. A war, however, offers peculiar circumstances for what concerns reflections of guilt. Some scholars have even claimed that in the case of intrastate wars, questions of individual responsibility and guilt become so dubious and blurred that they should not be addressed.⁴⁸ By contrast, Bourke rejects this view and claims that in warfare questions of guilt cannot be dismissed, but become paramount, especially for those men and women that go through it.⁴⁹ Hence, she discusses two types of guilt that commonly affect soldiers at war, which constitute what can be called forms of 'war guilt'.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

⁴⁸ These positions are discussed in Bourke, *Intimate History of Killing*, pp. 207-210.

⁴⁹ Bourke shows that in the accounts given by many veterans guilt is often felt and discussed and many soldiers insist on issues of individual responsibility, Ibid., pp. 207-209. See also Baraban, Jaeger and Muller, 'Introduction', in *Fighting words*, p. 10.

The first is what she calls 'killer's guilt', meaning the sense of guilt that arises from killing another person in combat.⁵⁰ Although this type of guilt is not usually felt in the immediate aftermath of a war action, it often emerges later, and can torment people who took part in a battle for a long time. The second is 'survivor's guilt', which concerns the sense of guilt that one feels towards the companions that did not make it through the war. This is an extremely common feeling haunting war veterans who often develop the idea of not having done enough for the comrades who died in battle.⁵¹

The conceptualisations developed by Bourke can now be combined with those created by Jasper. Following Bourke's distinction between ordinary killing and unlawful use of violence, the idea of killer's guilt can be split into two categories. The killer's guilt stemming from the use of lawful war violence corresponds to Jasper's moral guilt. In fact, the killing of another individual in a war action cannot be seen as a criminal act, as war is based on the legal suspension of the prohibition to kill; hence, the guilt that these deeds generate is only the product of the conscience of a person.

The reference to moral guilt explains why, during a war, a soldier can feel entitled to lawfully kill someone, not feeling culpable of any criminal offense, but still bearing the moral responsibility for what was done. By contrast, the use of unlawful violence constitutes a war crime and relates, therefore, to Jasper's notion of criminal guilt, since it concerns

⁵⁰ Bourke, *Intimate History of Killing*, p. 208.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 208. See also Alfano, *Ciò che ritorna*, pp. 66-67.

actions that break the codes of war conduct agreed upon at the international level and ratified by individual states.⁵²

Finally, the idea of survivor's guilt can be linked to Jasper's metaphysical one. Although the latter has been generally used to address the Holocaust and the responsibility of the Western World for it, this concept also reflects well the condition of a war survivor.⁵³ Indeed, when defining metaphysical guilt Jaspers argues that:

If I was present at the murder of others without risking my life to prevent it, I feel guilty in a way not adequately conceivable either legally, politically or morally. That I live after such a thing has happened weighs upon me as indelible guilt.⁵⁴

The sense of guilt that many ex-servicemen feel for having survived, while so many companions did not, is linked to the metaphysical tie that exists between human beings, which, in a military platoon, is generally fortified by the sense of brotherhood in arms.⁵⁵

In order to complete the parallel between the various forms of war guilt and Jasper's categories, it is necessary to introduce another concept that has not been discussed by Bourke, but will prove extremely useful in the analysis of the Italian literature of the Axis War: the awareness of

⁵² At the time of World War II the International law of war was regulated by a series of international conventions such as the 1907 'The Hague Convention on Inter-State War', the 1929 'Wound and Sick Convention', and by the 1929 'Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War'. At the end of the war, however, Nazi war criminals were tried according to codes created for the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials. See C. Focarelli, 'International War in the Twentieth Century', in A. Orakhelashvili, ed., *Research Handbook on the Theory and History of International Law* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011), pp. 478-495.

⁵³ On the use of the concept of metaphysical guilt in relation to the Holocaust see B. Giesen, 'The Trauma of Perpetrators: The Holocaust as the Traumatic Reference of German National Identity', in *Cultural Trauma*, p. 144.

⁵⁴ Jasper, *The Question of German Guilt*, p. 26.

⁵⁵ On the bonds that link soldiers in a platoon see, Hillman, *Terrible Love of War*, pp. 151-153; Hanna Arendt, *On Violence* (New York; London: Harcourt, 1969), pp. 67-68.

having waged an unjust war. This fourth type of war guilt constitutes the counterpart of Jasper's political guilt, since it is a sense of guilt that a person feels not because of actions that he or she directly committed, but because of what has been done by the national community to which the individual belongs.

In the Italian literature of the Axis War these four forms of guilt are addressed and treated in extremely different ways. Survivor's guilt is the type that is more often discussed and that emerges in the most open terms. This sense of guilt can be generated by the most diverse situations: when a character feels that more could have been done to help a comrade who died in battle;⁵⁶ when feeling ashamed of being alive while so many have fallen;⁵⁷ after having left one's own battalion;⁵⁸ after having failed to understand that a soldier was planning to commit suicide.⁵⁹

By contrast, killer's guilt, in both moral and criminal terms, is rarely addressed by the texts.⁶⁰ This fact is not surprising as these forms of guilt are directly associated with the use of violence. Since the literature of the Axis War consistently glosses over the Italian use of violence, reflections on killer's guilt and on moral remorse for what one has done cannot be developed. Furthermore, by omitting any reference to

⁵⁶ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 89; Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. 278; Corti, *I più non ritornano*, pp. 143-144.

⁵⁷ Rigoni, *Il sergente*, p. 136.

⁵⁸ Terrosi, *La casa di Novach*, p. 114; Corti, *I più non ritornano*, p. 264.

⁵⁹ Biasion, *Sagapò*, p. 90.

⁶⁰ Besides the cases that will be analysed in the Epilogue and the rather ambiguous passage by Cecovini discussed in the previous section, across the corpus specific references to killer's guilt can be found only in one episode of *Giovinezza*, *Giovinezza*. See Preti, *Giovinezza*, p. 180.

the Italian involvement in war crimes, the texts do not constitute a platform to develop a meditation on criminal guilt either.

While the texts do not address these two forms of guilt, across the corpus there are several scenes and passages that touch upon the last type of guilt: the political and collective one stemming from the awareness of having waged an unjust war of aggression. For instance, in *Il sergente nella neve* a reflection on this type of guilt is triggered by Rigoni's discovery of the body of a Russian man, when he enters an izba, looking for food:

Poi in un angolo vedo delle donne e dei ragazzi che piangono. Piangono singhiozzando forte con la testa tra le mani e le spalle che sussultano. Allora mi accorgo dell'uomo morto sulla porta e vedo che lì vicino il pavimento è tutto rosso di sangue. Non so dire quello che ho provato; vergogna o disprezzo per me, dolore per loro o per me. Mi precipitai fuori come se fossi il colpevole.⁶¹

In this passage, analogously to other cases previously considered, the perpetrator of the killing remains unknown and precise responsibility is not attributed. Certainly, though, Rigoni is not the culprit of this murder; hence, his self-reproach does not relate to something he personally committed and cannot be configured as a form of criminal or moral guilt. If, nonetheless, Rigoni feels guilty, he does so because, as a member of the army that attacked the Soviet Union, he is conscious of sharing part of the responsibility for that killing: his sense of guilt, therefore, is a political one.

⁶¹ Rigoni, *Il sergente*, p. 122.

Similarly, in *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio*, after the Axis conquest of Greece, Italo Serri enters a monastery, triggering a panicked reaction among the nuns who live there. This event leads him to feel a sense of guilt stemming from his role as conqueror:

Allora, come a un comando, il gruppo delle monachelle si rigirò, la preghiera si interruppe all'istante: una ventata di follia parve sconvolgere l'armoniosità del gruppo [...] Una seconda gridò; e un coro di strilli e di pianti, uno stridio implorante e frenetico, una concitazione lamentosa e querula s'intrecciarono sui corpi in sussulto. 'Soltanto a vedermi...' si disse Serri. Provava un'umiliazione bruciante, come se si sentisse tramutato in oggetto di orrore e venisse accusato per una colpa non commessa. Un'angoscia nuova gli incupì i pensieri; guardò con tristezza la propria divisa, che per le sofferenze venute dalla guerra era indotto ad amare. Si rigirò lentamente, traendo la porta. Uscì, respinto.⁶²

Serri's sense of guilt is also not due to something he personally did — it is indeed 'una colpa non commessa' — but is due to the political responsibility of having taken part in a war of aggression.

The passages mentioned above show that both Rigoni and Bedeschi are conscious of having fought an unjust war. This awareness is well grounded in the texts of the main corpus and several of them present passages in which the Axis War is condemned.⁶³ Yet, despite this standpoint, guilt plays an extremely marginal role in the vast majority of the texts of the main corpus and does not appear as one of the main themes of the narratives.

⁶² Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. 73-74.

⁶³ See Rigoni, *Quota Albania*, pp. 35, 141; Cecovini, *Poggio Boschetto*, p. 291; Preti, *Giovinezza*, p. 257.

Several factors contribute to downplaying the idea of political guilt in the literature of the Axis War. The most significant is that in the majority of texts this sense of guilt is not constructed in numerous passages through the reiteration of recurrent elements, but is instead developed only in a few isolated scenes, such as those quoted above.⁶⁴ Hence, compared to the *topoi* and themes that develop exculpatory representations of the Italian participation in World War II, the few scenes that underline their political guilt do not acquire particular relevance.

Moreover, the absence of any reference to moral and criminal guilt reduces the effect that a cautious and limited thematisation of political guilt can achieve. In the vast majority of the texts, guilt is not presented as a burden that haunts the conscience of the characters of the stories, but as an isolated moment of contrition. In this way these few passages contribute more to criticising warfare and Fascism, rather than to foregrounding the idea of Italian responsibility.

Yet, if the vast majority of the texts of the literature of the Axis War do not address issues of guilt in thorough and deep ways, it is mainly due to a series of further textual strategies that counteract and nullify the idea of Italian guilt that is timidly introduced by these isolated scenes. Before considering in the next sections the masterplots that take part in this process, this chapter addresses two other strategies developed in four texts of the corpus.

⁶⁴ The texts that will be examined in the Epilogue, instead, offer a deeper take on the issue of the Italian guilt.

The first strategy consists in dissolving the precise idea of an Italian fault into an unspecified sense of universal guilt. In *I più non ritornano*, towards the end of the retreat, the conviction that suffering constitutes a universal component of the human condition leads Corti to interpret the war as the sign of God's punishment of humanity: 'ero un atomo dell'Umanità che soffriva, una piccolissima parte dello sterminato dolore umano. [...] avevo sentito come, anche in me, l'Umanità scontasse le sue colpe. Era giusto. Ma com'era doloroso!'.⁶⁵ This passage, which some critics have praised as the finding of God in the midst of the battlefield, puts forward the idea that war relates to a form of universal guilt.⁶⁶

In fact, in the last pages of his memoir Corti reflects on the fact that no one — not even the Fascists authorities — can be considered responsible for a tragedy such as a war, because similar events 'erano castighi all'intera Umanità, quelli. Solo Dio può castigare l'Umanità. Così si spiega la guerra'.⁶⁷ Through this religious perspective any sense of individual culpability disappears and the idea of Italian responsibility for the Axis War is diluted into the universal guilt that the entirety of humanity is said to share in front of God.

In *Kaputt* the autodiegetic narrator often discusses ideas of shame and guilt and he does not seem to discharge the idea of both a political and moral guilt that he, as an active member of Fascist Italy, must bear:

⁶⁵ Corti, *I più non ritornano*, p. 271.

⁶⁶ F. Morlion, 'Il Neorealismo letterario di Eugenio Corti', *L'ora dell'azione* (1948), now in *Presenza di Eugenio Corti*, p. 101.

⁶⁷ Corti, *I più non ritornano*, 289.

‘anche io certe volte penso che ho la mia parte di responsabilità in quel che accade oggi in Europa’.⁶⁸ These statements, however, are undermined by two factors. First of all, as a result of Malaparte's narrative style, based on a constant desire to surprise his readers through irony, sarcasm, and continuous reversals, the autodiegetic narrator of the book appears completely unreliable and readers find it extremely difficult to give credit to any of Malaparte's declarations.⁶⁹ Therefore, it is hard to interpret Malaparte's contrition as genuine.⁷⁰

Secondly, Malaparte's receptiveness to guilt is undermined by the fact that in his book this idea is also developed in universal terms, even if deprived of openly religious features. In *Kaputt* guilt is presented as a stain that marks every European citizen. As one of the characters of the story declares: “Ce n'est pas la guerre qui nous salit” disse Louise. “Siamo noi, noi stessi, che sporchiamo ogni nostro pensiero, ogni nostro sentimento. Nous sommes sales” ‘.⁷¹ In Malaparte's perspective, it is the whole of humanity that is impure and the war simply reveals this state of things.

The condition of impurity attributed to human beings, especially the Europeans, means that no one can claim to be innocent. This conception is embodied in a scene in which Malaparte, during a dream,

⁶⁸ Malaparte, *Kaputt*, p. 754.

⁶⁹ Panella, *L'estetica dello choc*, pp. 9, 14-17.

⁷⁰ Malaparte's unreliability led several scholars to stress the deficiency of his novel in relation to ethical issues. For instance, Gianni Grana underlines that Malaparte appears at the most ‘ambiguous’ and Charles Burdett notes that in relation to questions of guilt the main protagonist is ‘vague and evasive’: Grana, *Malaparte*, p. 87; C. Burdett, ‘Changing Identities through Memory: Malaparte's Self-Figurations in *Kaputt*’, in *European Memories*, p. 116.

⁷¹ Malaparte, *Kaputt*, p. 783.

visits the flat where he used to live in Paris and meets a younger version of himself in the company of other writers and intellectuals. Under the accusing eyes of his friends, who stare at him in silence, Malaparte utters his justification: 'mi fissano in silenzio, e io sento che hanno pietà di me, vorrei dir loro che non è colpa mia se son diventato crudele, tutti siamo diventati crudeli'.⁷² In this passage guilt is enlarged into an all-encompassing trait of the human condition, which glosses over the issue of Malaparte's individual responsibility.

By transforming guilt into a universal phenomenon, the books by Corti and Malaparte do not leave room to discuss and address individual culpability and the different degrees in which individuals are responsible. Indeed, as Hannah Arendt has pointed out, 'where all are guilty, no one is' and, therefore, 'confessions of collective guilt are the best possible safeguard against the discovery of culprits'.⁷³ In these two texts the universalization of the idea of guilt removes all the necessary distinctions and makes it impossible to foreground the issue of an Italian responsibility for the war.⁷⁴

The second strategy whereby guilt is nullified consists in letting the Italians perform an act of repentance through which they are forgiven. In order to analyse this strategy, which is developed in *Jovanka e le altre*

⁷² Ibid., 558.

⁷³ Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 65.

⁷⁴ Interestingly, in the postwar years ideas of collective guilt were developed especially by those people who, like Malaparte, had been strongly involved in the Fascist regime and, therefore, found in the extension of guilt a way to reduce their individual responsibility. See Zunino, *La Repubblica e il suo passato*, p. 574; Liucci, *La tentazione della 'casa in collina'*, pp. 152-154.

and *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia*, it is necessary, first of all, to assess for what kind of guilt the characters of these novels seek forgiveness.

In Pirro's novel, Jovanka's partisan squad captures Lieutenant Mario. During the period of captivity the man becomes acquainted with Jovanka and, although he does not understand exactly why, he gradually feels a growing pressure to apologise to her. Mario knows that this urge does not concern any act he personally committed, since, despite having taken part in anti-partisan operations where he probably killed, he does not feel guilty for these actions, as he considers them as a part of his military duty.⁷⁵ As a consequence of that, Mario's sense of guilt does not constitute a form of criminal guilt, nor a moral one.

His remorse becomes clearer only after he listens to Jovanka's story: the woman loved an Italian man, Rocco di Candia, by whom she had been first seduced and then abandoned. For this affair Jovanka was singled out by her community: she had her hair cut as a mark of shame, and was forced to become an outcast. Hearing about the troubles and difficulties the young woman experienced makes Mario feel guilty: 'pena e ribrezzo, compassione e inconsapevole amore, lo prostravano, quasi si ritenesse colpevole di tutto ciò che era successo a Jovanka, come se gli atti di Di Candia fosse stato lui a commetterli'.⁷⁶ This sense of culpability, which is caused by actions that Mario has not directly committed, but which have been carried out by a member of his community, stands for a sense of political guilt. As in the case of Rigoni and Bedeschi, Mario's sense

⁷⁵ Pirro, *Jovanka*, p. 199.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 204.

of guilt in *Jovanka e le altre* is due to Italy's participation into the Axis War.

Similarly, in Venturi's *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia*, Aldo Puglisi presents himself as a man who in war never killed anyone; as a consequence, he does not feel any form of killer's guilt.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, throughout the story he develops a sense of self-reproach, which culminates in this reflection:

Anche lui, pensò, aveva la sua parte di responsabilità [...] Era colpevole, non soltanto verso Caterina Patriotis, Nicolino, il popolo greco: ma anche verso i suoi artiglieri, anche verso se stesso. E forse, pensò, in qualche modo eran colpevoli anche i soldati, che si eran lasciati vestire. Si era fermato per lo stupore. Stupito di averla scoperta soltanto adesso, questa semplice, elementare verità.⁷⁸

As this passage shows with rare clarity, Puglisi feels guilty for having waged a war of aggression and he realises that essentially all the Italians could be considered culpable for that. In this case, too, the sense of culpability constitutes a form of political guilt.

Having developed a sense of political guilt, both Lieutenant Mario and Aldo Puglisi feel the urge to apologise. In *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia* this expression of repentance is addressed to Caterina Patriotis, a proud Greek teacher who initially criticised the Italian occupiers, but, once Puglisi begins to show signs of remorse, changes her view and progressively falls in love with him.⁷⁹ At the end of the story, when Puglisi is promoting the anti-German resistance on the island, the officer knows

⁷⁷ Venturi, *Bandiera bianca*, p. 178.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 180-181.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

that Caterina has completely forgiven him: 'le avesse spiegato del loro passato di conquistatori, delle loro divise, lei avrebbe continuato a guardarlo, gli occhi sempre più grandi e più umidi, perdonando'.⁸⁰ Similarly, in *Jovanka e le altre*, after Jovanka confesses the story of her shameful love with Di Candia and Mario shows repentance, the two kiss one another. Through this gesture the woman grants her forgiveness to the Italian officer.⁸¹

Ricœur, in the epilogue of *Memory, History, Forgetting*, conceptualises the act of forgiving as the exchange of two speech acts between two particular individuals, a perpetrator and a victim, who are linked to each other in what Ricœur names a vertical relation. The former needs, first of all, to recognise his or her agency in the crime committed, through an avowal whereby he or she assumes responsibility for what has been done.⁸² It is only after this admission that throws the perpetrator into the 'abyss of guilt' that the victim may consider — or dismiss — the possibility of granting pardon from the 'great high of the spirit of forgiveness'.⁸³ Ricœur conceptualises forgiveness as an ethical form of freedom that, importantly, belongs only to the victim, who is the only person occupying the position from which the 'liberating words of forgiveness' can be granted.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 176. This moment of repentance was already anticipated in other scenes of the text, see Ibid., pp. 56-57, 91-92.

⁸¹ Pirro, *Jovanka*, pp. 204, 222.

⁸² Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 461.

⁸³ Ibid., 483.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 479.

In Pirro's and Venturi's texts everything seems to follow the pattern traced by Ricœur: an Italian officer, as a member of the community of the perpetrators, confesses his political guilt to a woman who, as a member of the community that was invaded, stands in the position of the victim; the latter listens to the former's contrition, values his remorse as genuine, and grants forgiveness. Such an interpretation, however, masks an ethical flaw.

The broad academic debate that addresses the ways victims are represented in cultural production and that questions to what extent and under whose control the voices of subaltern groups emerge, points to the inevitable ethical questions that are bound to the representations of episodes of victimization and violence experienced by others.⁸⁵ In the scenes of forgiveness described above, the Italian authors control the victims' voices and use them to grant forgiveness to two members of the Italian army for their participation into the war.

This appropriation and control of the voices of the victims not only appears questionable and disconcerting, but, more importantly, infringes Ricœur's model that confers the power of forgiving only on the victims. In relation to the Axis occupations, neither Pirro nor Venturi, as members of the Italian community, occupies the position of the victim; rather they belong to the sphere of the perpetrators. Hence, their female fictional

⁸⁵ For examples of the ethical problems that historical narratives create see C. Davis, 'Trauma and Ethic: Telling the Other's Story', in M. Modlinger, P. Sonntag, eds., *Other People's Pain: Narratives of Trauma and the Question of Ethics* (Bern; Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 19-40. See also G. C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in C. Nelson, L. Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), pp. 271-313.

characters, who pronounce the relieving words of forgiveness that lessen the weight of the political guilt felt by the two Italian characters, do not really stand in the position from which forgiveness can be granted.

What in these two narratives is presented as an act of forgiveness coming from the side of the victim, under closer analysis is shown to be only a form of self-absolution. By controlling the voice of the victims of the Axis invasions, the two texts show that the latter have nothing serious to reproach the Italians for and that they are even able to forgive them.⁸⁶

5.3 The Masterplot of Sacrifice

Critics have often stressed the idea of sacrifice in relation to the literature of the Axis War. For instance, in a review of 1954, Carlo Tumiati underlines that Cecovini's war account embodies the human capacity of self-sacrifice;⁸⁷ Maier indicates the presence of an ethical element in Cecovini's war writing which he locates in the 'consapevole accettazione della sofferenza e del sacrificio';⁸⁸ Mondini recognises that the protagonists of the novels of the Russian campaign are heroes 'della tenacia, della fatica, del sacrificio';⁸⁹ Max Gallo, in a 1963 French review of

⁸⁶ Importantly, this textual strategy based on the control of the voice of the victims of the Italian invasion is not limited to the two cases discussed here, but it also informs many representations of the topos of the Good soldier, which often rely on the positive opinions that members of the occupied population allegedly had about the Italian occupiers.

⁸⁷ C. Tumiati, quoted in E. Guagnini, 'L'epica antieroica di Manlio Cecovini', in *Scrittori in divisa*, p. 131.

⁸⁸ Maier, *La narrativa di Cecovini*, p. 16.

⁸⁹ Mondini, *Alpini*, p. 171.

Revelli's *La guerra dei poveri*, defines the days of the retreat through the Russian steppe 'a véritable calvaire';⁹⁰ Corni names the days of the withdrawal 'two weeks of "martyrdom" in the snow';⁹¹ finally, Langella calls the soldiers portrayed in the Alpine literature of the Axis War 'vittime sacrificali di un'idea superiore o di un disegno di cui s'ignorano, non di rado, vantaggi e contenuti'.⁹²

The fact that scholars mention the concepts of sacrifice and martyrdom — the Christian counterpart of the former — so often when dealing with these war narratives is not surprising. Across Western societies the idea of sacrifice, both in religious and secular terms, has been traditionally deployed to explain war.⁹³ Hence, in these reviews the use of keywords related to this idea, rather than referring to some aspects of the texts, could be the result of the reviewer's intention to pay tribute to the suffering of the soldiers.

Yet, although this rhetorical function cannot be dismissed, these comments also underscore a feature of the literature of the Axis War, in which, indeed, the concept of sacrifice comes often into play, with various degrees of importance. In some texts sacrifice can be considered as one of the themes of the narrative. However, what distinguishes this idea from themes previously studied is the fact that in several texts sacrifice is not

⁹⁰ Max Gallo, 'Récit d'un combattant italien', *Revue d'histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale*, 13.50 (1963), 91-93 (p. 91).

⁹¹ Corni, 'Italy after 1945', in *The Legacy of Two World Wars*, p. 259.

⁹² Langella, 'Ecce Homo', in *Scrittori in divisa*, p. 169.

⁹³ On the survival of a religious framework to explain the military experience in World War II, and on its progressive disappearance in the subsequent decades see Schwarz, 'La morte e la patria: l'Italia e i difficili lutti della seconda guerra mondiale', *Quaderni storici*, 113.2 (2003) 551-587 (pp. 571-577).

simply thematised through a series of narrative scenes, but it emerges, above all, through the narrative progression of the story.

A prime example is Rigoni Stern's *Il sergente nella neve*, in which the idea of sacrifice is never directly addressed, but emerges only at the level of the plot. The first part of the book is a short section entitled 'il caposaldo', which describes the Italian outpost on the rear-front of the Stalingrad siege as a warm, almost cosy space, which preserves the Alpine soldiers from the winter's cold and from the hardship of the war. Buzzi argues that the narrative function of this part is to create an oasis of relative calm which will be broken by the retreat.⁹⁴ Indeed, the section ends in a climax, with the representation of a harsh Russian assault, which foreruns the order to retreat from the line on the river Don.

In the second part of the book the story of the retreat begins. In lyrical prose that continuously mixes the temporal planes of the story, with analepses about the companions who died and prolepses about the fate of those who will eventually survive, Rigoni narrates the retreat through the Russian steppe. The climax of the story is reached with the battle of the 26th of January, when the Italians manage to break through the Russian line around the village of Nikolayevka. A great part of Rigoni's battalion is destroyed and many of his comrades are killed in the action. After that, Rigoni spends some days marching alone, as part of the mass of wretched soldiers who no longer belong to any battalion. Yet, the Italians

⁹⁴ Buzzi, *Invito alla lettura di Rigoni Stern*, p. 32.

are finally out of the Soviet-controlled area; Rigoni soon joins the few survivors of his unit, and the story reaches its conclusion.

In *Il sergente nella neve* Rigoni mediates his episodic memories of the retreat into a story that in its linearity and simplicity may almost appear to be plotless, having only the aim to represent the tragic conclusion of the Russian expedition. Yet, as a work of narrative the text inevitably generates a plot, regardless of the authorial intention, as a result of the simple fact that Rigoni had to select and structure the events he experienced into a story that runs from a beginning to an end.⁹⁵

One of the main effects of the book's narrative progression is the fact that the battle of Nikolayevka appears as a turning point, since it is presented as the last struggle that brings the retreat to an end. This is a deliberate choice, as the narrator openly points out: 'ora è finita la storia della sacca, ma della sacca soltanto. Tanti giorni poi abbiamo ancora camminato [...] Tante cose ci sarebbero ancora da dire, ma questa è un'altra storia'.⁹⁶

Gustavo Corni has noted that many of the memoirs of the Russian campaign end with this battle and sum up the events that follow in a few pages. Historians, though, and some memoirs as well, attest that after Nikolayevka the difficulties were not over and the Italians had to engage in more fighting. Corni suggests that, despite the battle's military importance, the choice of concluding the story of this long exhausting

⁹⁵ B. Richardson, 'Beyond the Poetics of Plot: Alternative Forms of Narrative Progression and the Multiple Trajectories of Ulysses', in Phelan, P. Rabinowitz, eds., *A Companion to Narrative Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 167-168.

⁹⁶ Rigoni, *Il sergente*, p. 153.

march with this combat responds more to a narrative necessity of closure, rather than to the needs of factual reporting.⁹⁷ In other words, in the Italian memoirs Nikolayevka marks the peak of pathos and symbolises the reaching of a safe area, to which the soldiers did not in fact arrive until days later.

As a result of the selection and organisation— what Patrick Colm Hogan calls 'structuration' — of the narrative material, the narrative progression of *Il sergente nella neve* confers particular significance on the idea of sacrifice.⁹⁸ After the opening chapter portraying a war carried out in an atmosphere of relative calm and fairness, the retreat breaks through, and the Italian soldiers enter into a dimension characterised only by cold, pain, and suffering. It is only through the death of many men, often the most brave and generous, that the Italians are able to leave the Soviet-controlled area. The struggles during the retreat, and the battle of Nikolayevka in particular, become extreme acts of sacrifice whereby the Italians achieve at the cost of immense suffering and losses an exit from the Axis War. In the book there are no keywords related to sacrifice, nor are there scenes that openly thematise this concept; instead the idea of sacrifice is constructed at the level of the plot, thanks to the story's narrative progression.

The skeletal structure of *Il sergente nella neve* constitutes an example of what can be called a masterplot of sacrifice. This masterplot

⁹⁷ Corni, *Raccontare la guerra*, p. 145.

⁹⁸ P. Colm Hogan, 'Stories, Wars, and Emotions: The Absoluteness of Narrative Beginnings', in Richardson, ed., *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practice* (Lincoln Neb.; London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), p. 49.

can be conceived of as a narrative that focuses on the undeserved and unjustified adversities and tribulations of the protagonists, culminating in a moment of extreme suffering that concludes the story. Mondini has recognised the presence of this typified narrative structure — which he calls 'grand narrative' — in the books of Rigoni, Revelli, and Bedeschi, which, he argues, can be read as a unique 'ciclo focalizzato sull'epopea del sacrificio'.⁹⁹

Mondini's reading situates the formation of this recurrent narrative progression within the process of reshaping of the Alpine iconography after World War II. The masterplot of sacrifice, however, has a larger scope and goes beyond the perimeter of Alpine culture. Indeed, it represents a recurrent narrative structure through which the events of the Axis War have been narrated and, besides the texts on the Russian retreat, it influences other literary works.

In the creation of this typified narrative progression many of the themes that were previously studied play a role: by presenting the Italians as innocent victims of war and by focusing on the extreme suffering and unspeakable horrors that war entails, many narratives put the idea of the sacrifice of the soldiers at the centre of their stories. Yet, what orients the narrative progression into a sacrificial framework is above all the presence of a peak of agony, positioned at the conclusion of the narrative, which brings the story to an end.

⁹⁹ Mondini, *Alpini*, p. xii. See also Mondini, 'Manly Heroes and Innocent Victims', in *Mnemosyne*, p. 113.

For instance in Revelli's text, similarly to Rigoni's case, this climax is reached with the battle of Nikolayevka; in *I villaggi bruciano* Pompeo's adventures across the Balkans ends with a period of captivity into a German POW camp, which marks the protagonist's peak of suffering; both *Guerra d'Albania* and *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia* end with the massacre of Cephalonia, where an entire Italian division was executed by the Germans.

Moreover, at the conclusion of some of these narratives it is possible to find passages that thematise the idea of sacrifice and let it emerge in more open terms. For example, in *La guerra dei poveri*, in the aftermath of the battle of Nikolayevka, the narrator reveals in an invocation to God the sacrificial nature of the experience he narrated:

Dio Cristo, tu che ci hai seguiti da Belogore a Belgorod, che hai visto quanto abbiamo sofferto, tu che vedi quanto soffriamo, abbi pietà di noi! Perché vuoi farci soffrire ancora? Ormai abbiamo dato tutto di noi stessi, i migliori sono morti combattendo [...] Basta con la Russia: poveri alpini, quanti morti! [...] [i tedeschi] passavano senza pietà, senza capire, senza pensare che eravate morti per aprire la strada a tutti, anche a loro. Poveri morti alpini! [...] Dio, guardaci! Perché dobbiamo soffrire tanto?¹⁰⁰

The prayer-like tone of the passage, together with the supplication for God's mercy, places the sufferings that the Alpine soldiers faced into a Christian framework of martyrdom. The experience of the retreat is directly called a form of sacrifice a few pages later, when Revelli remembers the battle of Nikolayevka, a month after the event:

¹⁰⁰ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, pp. 97-99.

È passato un mese dal giorno del sacrificio del Tirano. 26 gennaio: Aranutovo! Nikolaevka! Troppi morti [...] Alpini, alpini del Tirano falciati dalle armi automatiche, dagli anticarro, dalle artiglierie: con le nostre armi che non sparavano, con le nostre bombe a mano che non scoppiavano. Affondando nella neve fino al ginocchio, gli alpini cadevano e non c'era chi li rimpiazzasse. Le munizioni mancavano e nessuno pensava a fornirne.¹⁰¹

In the excerpt the Alpine soldiers are presented as victims who went through extreme and unjustified pains and had to pay with their lives for the disorganisation of the Italian army, reinforcing the idea that their death constitutes an unnecessary sacrifice.

Another open reference to the sacrificial nature of the Axis War can be found in the last paragraph of Fusco's *Guerra d'Albania*:

La guerra d'Albania, ch'era cominciata il 28 ottobre 1940 col delittuoso sacrificio della 'Julia', si chiuse definitivamente, dopo tre anni, con l'assassinio della 'Acqui'. Trentacinque mesi di stupidità, d'incompetenza, di ferocia insensata e di sacrifici inutili.¹⁰²

The book ends on this note, presenting the entire Italian war experience in World War II as a useless sacrifice.

In *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia*, instead, the narrator does not speak openly about a sacrifice, but in describing the war crime of Cephalonia resorts to elements reminiscent of ritualistic practices:

Quel fumo, pensarono i cefaloti e gli scampati [...] era la Divisione Acqui che saliva al cielo. Quanti? Si domandarono. Quanti ne erano stati bruciati? Centoquarantasei ufficiali e quattromila soldati, catturati vivi e poi uccisi, nelle esecuzioni

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁰² Fusco, *Guerra d'Albania*, p. 121.

sommarie, salivano verso il cielo in quelle spesse, pigre nubi di fumo. [...] Ci volevano tutte quelle nubi nel cielo, pensò, per placare la furia dei tedeschi, per soddisfare la loro sete di vendetta.¹⁰³

In this excerpt the image of the fire, the ascending billow of smoke, and the idea that the slaughter can appease a vengeful power draw an analogy between the German war crime and ancient pagan rituals of sacrifice.

The structuring of these narratives according to the masterplot of sacrifice has a significant impact on how these texts deal with the issue of the Italian responsibility for the war. In order to address this point it is useful to consider *Centomila gavette di ghiaccio*, a novel that, more than others, thematises the idea of sacrifice and openly places it in a relationship with questions of guilt.

Near the end of the retreat the Italians know that they are close to the German area where they will finally be safe, but they are exhausted and feel unable to fight and carry on any longer. So close to safety, they might still fail to make it. In this distressing situation Serri sees a captain giving in to despair and attempting to commit suicide by shooting himself in the temple; the gun, however, gets stuck, leaving the man in dismay. When Serri rushes to aid him, the Captain thinks through the meaning of their experience:

'Tentiamo tutti di ammazzarci, da dodici giorni a questa parte, con la scusa di correre dietro alla storiella della sacca da varcare... Provano tutti ad ammazzarsi, anche tu; tutti, ti dico, in ogni modo, con tutti i mezzi possibili. Ma non ci riusciamo, questo è il nostro destino. [...] tieni a mente quello che ti dico: a

¹⁰³ Venturi, *Bandiera bianca*, pp. 246-247.

noi non resta che l'inferno, per migliorare questa sorte dannata. Sistemati per sempre, no? E la colpa? Ci pensavo poco fa, con la rivoltella in mano: la colpa va divisa. Un po' mia, un po' tua, un po' di tutta la gente del mondo: ciascuno ha fatto o non ha fatto qualcosa, a tempo debito, per arrivare alla guerra. Noi saldiamo il conto ora, amen'.¹⁰⁴

Although the words of the Captain put forward the idea that all the Italians are burdened with guilt, the passage immediately nullifies the sense of guilt that this recognition entails. In fact, not only does it extend guilt into a universal condition, as in the cases of Corti and Malaparte, but, more importantly, it also introduces a new factor: the idea that the Alpine soldiers who have been caught up in the collapse of the Stalingrad front are actually paying for their part of the blame for their participation in the Axis War. From this perspective the sufferings that the Italians have faced during the retreat becomes an act of penance whereby guilt can be expiated.

This passage reveals the deep meaning that the masterplot of sacrifice entails: the experience of suffering allows the Italians to atone for their participation in the war and to be purified from its guilt. Therefore, if in all the texts considered in this section the idea of Italian guilt has only a marginal role and does not constitute an important theme of the narratives, it is mainly due to the atoning function of the masterplot of sacrifice that counterpoises the idea of Italian responsibility with the suffering that the soldiers experienced.

¹⁰⁴ Bedeschi, *Centomila gavette*, p. 392.

This expiating function has also been highlighted by Mondini who notes that in the stories of the retreat from Russia 'si cela anche un significato salvifico' through which the Italian soldiers mark not only their detachment from Fascist Italy, but also 'dalle colpe — che erano state scontate con la sofferenza'.¹⁰⁵ Extending the meaning that the masterplot of sacrifice acquires in Bedeschi's novel and in Mondini's reading of the Alpine grand narrative to all the texts that adopt a skeletal plot based on the idea of sacrifice might appear questionable. However, traces of the atoning function of this masterplot can actually be found in all the texts considered.

In fact, all these narratives put forward the idea that the Italians have actually paid for what happened in the war. For instance in *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia*, Aldo Puglisi thinks that, given his initial support for the Axis War, he has a special responsibility for the disasters that the war has caused. This leads him to look for ways of atoning: 'lo scotto doveva pagarlo lui, lo doveva pagare gente simile a lui'.¹⁰⁶ By the end of the story Puglisi will be among the thousands of soldiers slaughtered by the Germans. Within the structure of the novel, therefore, the abominable massacre of the Italian division appears as an extreme and excessive tribute that Puglisi and his companions pay for their participation in the war. Through this conclusion the sense of guilt that the text previously hinted at is resolved and nullified.

¹⁰⁵ Mondini, *Alpini*, pp. 174, 187.

¹⁰⁶ Venturi, *Bandiera bianca*, p. 101.

In *I villaggi bruciano*, when Pompeo is moved to the prison camp, he admits that he was a Lieutenant of the army and, as a result, his inmates, who are mainly common soldiers, look down on him. However, Pompeo appears so wretched and undernourished that he quickly gains the others' sympathy. This is made possible by the vicissitudes the Lieutenant went through, which are presented as a source of atonement: as a cook says, while passing some extra food to him: '“è un ufficiale” gli diceva accompagnando il dono “ma ha scontato questo peccato”'.¹⁰⁷

In *La guerra dei poveri*, Revelli feels that through the suffering of the retreat he sufficiently paid for the support he initially granted to the Axis War. As he states once he returns to Italy: 'ho pagato la mia parte in questa guerra maledetta, ho pagato abbondantemente'.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, in the conclusion of Fusco's *Guerra d'Albania*, the 8th of September 1943 is presented as the source of a renovation that the Italians achieve through their sacrifice:

Se migliaia di soldati e ufficiali italiani persero tragicamente la vita, nella palingenesi del settembre 'badogliano' fu per mano di criminali tedeschi. L'ultimo capitolo della Guerra d'Albania [...] lo scrissero, col loro sangue, gli uomini della sventurata divisione Acqui.¹⁰⁹

The 8th of September becomes a regenerating moment — a 'palingenesi' — which is marked by the sacrifice of the Acqui division, to which the last part of the book is devoted.

¹⁰⁷ Nesti, *I villaggi bruciano*, p. 237.

¹⁰⁸ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 112.

¹⁰⁹ Fusco, *Guerra d'Albania*, p. 110.

By putting forward the idea that the Italians have paid for their participation in the Axis War, the conclusions of these narratives contribute to conferring an expiating meaning on the masterplot of sacrifice. Hence, the war experience is transformed in a moment of atonement and the sense of guilt that is latently present in some of these texts is concurrently addressed and nullified. Thanks to the masterplot of sacrifice, the Italians can no longer be considered accountable for any wrongdoing, as they have expiated their guilt through suffering.

5.4 The Masterplot of Conversion

In a *Terrible Love of War* Hillman argues that warfare has often appeared to human beings as an experience able to provide meaning to life. He writes:

War begs for meaning, and amazingly also gives meaning, a meaning found in the midst of its chaos. Men who survive battle come back and say it was the most meaningful time of their lives, transcendent to all other meanings.¹¹⁰

The idea that war is an event in which human beings can discover some hidden significance of their existence also appears across the texts of the main corpus.

At the beginning of *L'entusiasta*, Pietro Andreis has great expectations and a staunch desire to prove his courage in war actions;

¹¹⁰ Hillman, *Terrible Love of War*, p. 10.

when he is about to depart for Greece he feels a strong satisfaction since 'finalmente andava ad un fronte di guerra'.¹¹¹ Similarly, in the first part of *La guerra dei poveri*, Revelli recounts the great impatience with which he awaited the departure to the Russian front after having completed the training as officer: 'non dovevo perdere tempo, dovevo partire volontario. Soltanto in guerra darò un volto, quello vero, a questa patria che non conosco. In guerra toccherò la verità'.¹¹² At the beginning of these books, both Andreis and Revelli the character transmit the fervour with which Fascist Italy entered into World War II and embody the enthusiastic celebration of warfare that characterised Fascist culture.¹¹³

Revelli's and Andreis' desire to prove themselves in combat, however, is initially frustrated by their disappointing experiences on the rear of the frontline. Andreis is struck by the sloppiness of the soldiers, who idly remain there while seeking out dull occupations that could keep them far from the front. This initial negative experience strengthens Andreis' aspiration to reach the frontline, where he thinks that his ideals and moral commitment will finally find the occasion to be put into practice: 'al fronte, si diceva, al fronte; con un plotone di uomini a cui essere d'esempio, con un pezzo di trincea da difendere! Oh, quanto avrebbe voluto trovarsi già al fronte!'.¹¹⁴

Similarly, in *La guerra dei poveri*, a short time after his arrival in Russia, Revelli is hospitalised because of an injured arm: stuck in the rear,

¹¹¹ Pirelli, *L'entusiasta*, p. 29.

¹¹² Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 7.

¹¹³ On the value of war in Fascist culture see Zunino, *La Repubblica e il suo passato*, pp. 107-110.

¹¹⁴ Pirelli, *L'entusiasta*, p. 33.

the officer can observe the corruption and disorganization that affect the Italian army. In response to what he sees, he feels the urge to go back to the front:

Ero stanco degli ospedali, del convalescenziario, degli imboscanti, di tutto un mondo falso e corrotto. Se non mi mollavano con le buone me ne sarei andato di prepotenza, sarei tornato in linea a cercare un po' di aria pulita.¹¹⁵

Despite their initial disappointments, both Andreis and Revelli do not lose their enthusiasm and their faith in the purifying power of warfare. Loaded with these expectations the two men go through the war and experience the defeat of the Italian army. This irreversibly spoils their dreams of glory; however it does not abolish the meaning-making capacity that they attributed to warfare. By contrast, it is through the experience of defeat that the two grasp a new understanding that will change their lives.

Andreis' revelation occurs during the first combat he personally witnesses. After losing his way in a blizzard, frozen almost to death, he is rescued by the Alpine soldier Da Rin. The two manage to join a group of Italian soldiers, withdrawing after the collapse of the front, but there a Greek squad ambushes them. While he is still injured and unable to move, Andreis observes what modern combat looks like: soldiers untidily moving around, fiddling with the artillery, trying to aim at the enemy, while clumsily ducking to the ground. This view astonishes him and forces him to question the ideas he had about warfare:

¹¹⁵ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 31.

‘Che cos’è questo? La guerra?’ si chiedeva Andreis [...] non riusciva a capacitarsi perché fosse in quel luogo, quale relazione potesse esistere fra se stesso, il sottotenente Pietro Andreis, volontario al fronte greco, e quel disordine, quello sfacelo; tra l’eccitante battesimo del fuoco che aveva sognato e quelle agghiaccianti esplosioni, quei sibili, quei miagolii sinistri vagolanti nell’aria; tra il suo concetto di sacrificio, di eroismo, e la morte banale del mitragliere. ‘C’è un errore’ si diceva ‘c’è sicuramente un errore’.¹¹⁶

What Andreis feels during his uninspiring baptism of fire is the strong and urgent sensation that something must be wrong. This sense of mistake stems from the incompatibility between his preconception of war and his first direct encounter with it. Modern warfare is a dehumanizing, traumatic, and unromantic experience, which leaves no room for Andreis’ idealist views.¹¹⁷ In other words, the mistake has to do with the Fascist celebration of warfare, a conception that, after having nurtured Andreis’ youth and bolstered his enthusiasm for the Greek campaign, inevitably crashes against the reality of modern combat.

Similarly, in *La guerra dei poveri*, during the retreat Revelli witnesses first-hand the scantiness and shoddiness of the Italian weaponry and the total deficiency of military organisation. This experience opens up his eyes and makes him realise that the Fascist goal of transforming Italy into a superpower — which had once mesmerised him — was rather an empty dream that did not have any basis, given Fascist Italy’s military weakness. As Revelli reflects, once he is back in Italy: ‘ho veduto troppe cose false. I “miei campi Dux”, le mie sfilate sulla

¹¹⁶ Pirelli, *L’entusiasta*, p. 89.

¹¹⁷ G. Barberi Squarotti, *Poesia e narrativa del secondo novecento* (Milan: Mursia, 1978), p. 331.

via dell'Impero, le adunate oceaniche, la grinta del duce, la pazzia collettiva! Adesso è facile capire...'.¹¹⁸ With the insights matured during the war Revelli realises that he can no longer believe in Fascism.

In both narratives the direct experience of war and its related suffering marks an irreconcilable fracture with the values conveyed by Fascist culture. The Axis War becomes, therefore, the source of a revelation, which shows how the Italians were mistaken in following the regime's promises of greatness, which were built upon unrealistic evaluation of national means. Besides the two cases considered, this idea can be found also in other texts of the corpus, such as *Giovinezza*, *Giovinezza* and *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia*.

In all these narratives, the protagonist's new perspective has a crucial effect on the development of the plot and leads to the formation of a typified structure of narrative progression that acquires the form of a masterplot of conversion. The protagonist of this recurrent plot initially complies with the Fascist regime and its wars; however, through the experience of defeat, the discovery of the misery of the Italian army, and the witnessing of German violence, he realises the mistake he committed; thanks to this new awareness he embraces Antifascism and he is ready to fight against the Fascists and the Germans in the Italian Civil War.

In *La guerra dei poveri* the suffering faced in Russia leads Revelli to detest the Germans, who have not given enough support to the withdrawing Italian troops, and makes him reach the conclusion that they

¹¹⁸ Revelli, *Guerra dei poveri*, p. 111.

are Italy's real enemy. This process of conversion already appears fully developed at the end of the chapter on the retreat. Days after they exited from Soviet-controlled lands, the survivors receive a visit from some military officers who bring to the troops the personal salute of Mussolini. Revelli's reaction is harsh and full of resentment:

Cialtroni! Più nessuno crede alle vostre falsità, ci fate schifo: così la pensano i superstiti dell'immensa tragedia che avete voluto. Le vostre tronfie parole vuote non sono che l'ultimo insulto ai nostri morti. Raccontatela a chi la pensa come voi: chi ha fatto la ritirata non crede più ai gradi e vi dice: 'Mai tardi... a farvi fuori!'.¹¹⁹

In this final paragraph the Italians who have gone through the Russian expedition are portrayed as a unanimous group that is counterpoised to the military officers, who represent the Fascist authorities. To the boastful words of Mussolini, reported by the officer, the narrator opposes the death of the soldiers who have paid for the regime's military incapacity. This protest becomes a call for action that exhorts the Italians to rebel against Fascism and fight against its proponents.¹²⁰

Revelli lived up to this conviction and during the Italian Civil War joined the squads of 'Giustizia e Libertà' and took part in the war of Resistance, to which the second part of *La guerra dei poveri* is devoted. The narrative progression of Revelli's memoir follows a plot of conversion

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 106.

¹²⁰ Significantly, the section of the memoir dealing with the retreat from Russia was initially published in 1946 with the title *Mai Tardi*. This accentuated the importance of this final paragraph and drew attention to the final transformation of the protagonist: Revelli, *Mai tardi: diario di un alpino in Russia* (Cuneo: Panfilo, 1946).

by telling the story of a man who, through the sufferings experienced in the Axis War, reaches an active Antifascist position.

In Pirelli's *L'entusiasta* this masterplot is not developed in its entirety and remains implicit. Andreis is unequivocally pressed by the sense of having been mistaken, but he has no time to reflect on the consequences of this insight. In fact, the enemies attack again: Da Rin is killed by a bomb and Andreis is badly injured. The officer, though, manages to survive and is rescued by Greek stretcher-bearers. It is not possible to tell what will happen to him and to which political position the awareness of the mistaken nature of the Axis War will lead him. However, the last paragraph of the novel, reporting the dialogue between the Greek soldiers who find him, provides a hint:

Il tenente greco [...] si fermò esitante. 'È un ufficiale fascista' disse nella sua lingua, con disprezzo, uno dei portaferiti che lo seguivano. 'Ma no, è soltanto un ragazzo' disse l'ufficiale greco. 'Lo si può ancora salvare'.¹²¹

In the last scene of the book Andreis is deprived of his Fascist identity and returns to being just a young man. He will have more time to think through what he experienced during the war and it is not unlikely that his sense of being mistaken will evolve into a rejection of Fascism, which would give a political meaning to the idea of salvation that closes the story.¹²² Diane Weill-Ménard develops a similar reading and argues that

¹²¹ Pirelli, *L'entusiasta*, p. 94.

¹²² In its first edition 'L'entusiasta' was followed by another of Pirelli's stories, 'La malattia del comandante Gracco', which was devoted to the Resistance. This succession created, therefore, a bridge between Andreis' new awareness and the partisan war. Moreover, this interpretation of the conclusion of the story also reflects Pirelli's

for Andreis 'ci sarà [...], inevitabile, una presa di coscienza che segue all'annientamento [...] delle illusioni politiche'.¹²³

While in Pirelli's text the masterplot of conversion is not complete and remains only implicit, Preti's *Giovinezza*, *Giovinezza* presents this typified narrative progression in its entirety. The book follows the lives of Giulio and his friends while they grow up in Fascist Italy. The young protagonists have gone through all the levels of Fascist education, up to the University Fascist Group (GUF), and are used to seeing the regime and its rituals as normal. In the first part of the story Giulio believes in the righteousness of Mussolini's dictatorship, despite the overt criticism levelled by some friends of his. However, with the war things start to change.

After he hears extensive news concerning the defeats of the Italian army, Giulio understands that Italy is a weak military power. Hence, he begins to realise the falsity of Fascist propaganda, which described Italy as a strong nation ready for the war. This leads Giulio to abandon the ideals of his youth:

Il piedistallo, su cui il giovane aveva elevato l'idolo della sua giovinezza, andava definitivamente in frantumi; e gli restava solo un gran vuoto nel cuore. Come aveva potuto essere così stupido da non capirlo prima? Eppure aveva litigato mille volte con Giordano per difendere il duce!¹²⁴

autobiographical trajectory. Studies that have focused on Pirelli's private writings have shown that it was the experience of the Axis War on the Russian front that led Pirelli to break with Fascism: see N. Tranfaglia, 'Il lungo viaggio di Giovanni Pirelli attraverso la guerra', in Tranfaglia, *L'Italia repubblicana e l'eredità del fascismo* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2001), pp. 217-266; Rachel E. Love, 'A Fragmented Transformation: Giovanni Pirelli's War Writings 1940-1944', *Modern Italy*, 21.3 (2016), 261-272.

¹²³ D. Weill-Ménard, *Vita e tempi di Giovanni Pirelli* (Milan: Linea d'Ombra, 1994), p. 114.

¹²⁴ Preti, *Giovinezza*, p. 168.

From this moment on, Giulio begins a process of ideological transformation. When he is conscripted, he no longer believes in Fascism. However, it is only after the direct experience of the war that this process of transformation is accomplished. When he returns to Italy after the collapse of the African front where he fought, Giulio is an Antifascist and, after the 8th of September, he joins the Socialist party, playing an active part in the Italian Resistance to which the last part of *Giovinezza*, *Giovinezza* is devoted.

A similar form of narrative progression also characterises *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia*. Initially, Aldo Puglisi, being a career officer, has no objections against the war. However, as time goes by in occupied Cephalonia, he starts questioning the life he spent as a compliant member of an authoritarian society. Puglisi's evolution finds its accomplishment after the 8th of September, when the officer and other comrades decide to fight against the Germans. This choice is presented as a source of renewal that also entails an evident straightforward transformation: the Italian soldiers that until then were presented as unmilitary peasants now assume a more serious and ferocious appearance:

Per un attimo si sentirono soldati, come mai era loro accaduto, per esempio sui monti d'Albania o nei villaggi di Grecia; [...] Li guardò i suoi artiglieri; non avevano più nulla del contadino, da quando avevano preso a sparare i loro cannoni; sembravano un incrocio tra operai di un'officina meccanica e guerrieri primitivi, che combattevano con le pietre e con le lance, non con i cannoni.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Venturi, *Bandiera bianca*, pp. 172, 215.

The military aspect that was denied to the regular soldiers that took part in the Axis War becomes acceptable when these men change sides and start fighting against the Germans. Now Venturi portrays the Italians as a group of irregular combatants, who resemble the guerrilla fighters of the Italian Resistance, and in this context the warlike nature of the Italians can finally emerge.

In all these narratives the transformation of the main characters, in accordance with the masterplot of conversion, has a strong impact on the way the ideas of Italy's guilt and responsibility are dealt with. In fact, if in the considered narratives guilt does not play a significant role, despite the widespread recognition of the unjust nature of the Axis War, it is mainly due to the masterplot of conversion that shows that the Italians have realised the error they committed in supporting the Fascist dictatorship and are ready to counteract it.

The conversion to Antifascism and the involvement in the war of Resistance against both the Germans and the Fascists compensate for the previous support given to the wars of the regime. These conversions work as acts of redemption that dismiss the idea of guilt and free the Italians from any sense of self-reproach.

On some occasions the redemptive and self-exculpatory function that the masterplot of conversion entails is openly addressed. For instance, in *Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia*, the narrator describes in this way the feeling of the soldiers who chose to oppose the Germans:

Era come se le umiliazioni patite dall'armistizio a oggi,
l'exasperazione dell'attesa, quel senso di tradimento che si

stesse consumando alle loro spalle, era come se tutto questo lo avessero cancellato. E avessero cancellato qualcosa di più profondo, di più lontano nel tempo.¹²⁶

The choice of fighting against Fascism assumes the cathartic power of deleting the burden that past actions generated. If the narrator counts among these burdens the stress and humiliations caused by the surrender and by the incapacity of the military commands that, after the 8th of September, left the soldiers in Greece without clear orders, the last sentence highlights that this redemptive function also addresses something more substantial. Nothing in the text explains what this refers to; however, it seems logical to infer that this burden has to do with the war itself, the invasion of other countries, and the support given to Fascism throughout the years of the dictatorship.

The four texts considered for this section develop a redemptive pattern of narrative progression that counteracts and nullifies the idea of Italian guilt. Other texts of the corpus, even if they do not present this masterplot, still offer signs of the process of conversion. For instance, both *Quota Albania* and *La linea del Tomori* feature as a main character a man who has already developed Antifascist beliefs. In these cases the ideological transformation does not unfold through the plot of the story, but is presented as an unproblematic matter of fact. Similarly, many of the soldiers who appear in *Sagapò*, *Le rose del ventennio*, and *Guerra d'Albania*

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 172.

are characterized by Antifascist ideas or by a spontaneous aversion to the regime.¹²⁷

Another example of the redemptive power offered by Antifascism also emerges in an already analysed, but extremely telling passage of 'Ritorno sul Don', in which Rigoni claims his proximity to the victims of Nazism:

No, noi qui non eravamo come i tedeschi; e dopo, quando ognuno poté scegliere, fui con voi. Per questo posso dire tranquillamente: 'Ià italiani' e voi rispondermi sorridendo: 'Italianschi carasciò'.¹²⁸

The reference to a moment of choice alludes to the months Rigoni spent in a German POW camp, where the Italians were given the opportunity to be freed if they chose to go back to fight for the Fascist RSI. However, Rigoni, like a vast majority of the Italian prisoners, did not opt out, in spite of the harsh conditions in which they had to live, and spent the last months of the war in confinement.¹²⁹ Therefore, if in this excerpt Rigoni can so openly affirm his lack of guilt and the conviction that the Italians did not share the responsibility of the Germans, it is also due to the Antifascist choice he made when he was a POW.

Across the corpus the masterplot of conversion offers a redemptive pattern that downplays the idea of Italian guilt, preventing a thorough assumption of responsibility for the Axis War. These texts do

¹²⁷ See Biasion, *Sagapò*, pp. 156, 180; Fusco, *Rose del Ventennio*, pp. 61-62, 75, 81; Fusco, *Guerra d'Albania*, pp. 8, 42, 73.

¹²⁸ Rigoni, *Ritorno sul Don*, p. 290.

¹²⁹ On the Italian POW in the German camps see Rochat, 'La memoria dell'internamento: militari italiani in Germania 1943-1945', *Italia contemporanea*, 163 (1986) 5-30.

not foreground the idea of guilt as they assume that the Italians are free from blame, since in the last years of the war they turned against Fascism and fought against it. The structuration of so many stories around the conversion of the main protagonist on the one hand affirmed and spread the importance and the rightness of the Antifascist choice. On the other hand, though, it offered an absolving screen that distanced the Italians from Fascism, war guilt, and the wrongdoings that they committed in the Axis War.

Conclusion

The masterplots of sacrifice and conversion constitute the most frequent and typified narrative structures according to which the Axis War has been narrated by Italian literature. These two masterplots counteract the idea of Italian guilt and resolve it by communicating to readers a sense of atonement and redemption. As a result, the masterplots reinforce at the level of the plot the idea of Italy's innocence that was already developed by the motifs and themes of the narratives.

These common ways of selecting, structuring, and plotting the events of the war go beyond literary depictions, having tight bonds with the memory narratives that circulated across Italian society. According to Schwarz the idea of sacrifice can be considered one of the main concepts used by different groups of Italians, from soldiers to partisans, from

civilians to deportees, to narrate their experience in World War II.¹³⁰ Santarelli has instead brought attention to the importance that the process of conversion had in the articulation of the Italian memory, by stressing that the figure of the soldier that has 'occupied the collective imagination after the end of the Second World War' has generally been a man who 'was not aligned with Fascism's ideological position'.¹³¹

Alongside the ideas of sacrifice and conversion, Italian memory narratives of World War II have also foregrounded those of atonement and redemption. Rusconi has been the first scholar to analyse this point in depth by linking the formation of a memory discourse centred on these ideas to the legacy of Fascism: he argues that the Italian memory of World War II was based on what he calls a 'patriottismo espiativo', which he defines as:

Il sentimento di appartenenza a una comunità nazionale che si avverte riconoscendosi nelle vittime di crimini efferati e ingiusti, ma oscuramente e inconsciamente vissuti come atti espiativi, appunto, di errori commessi in precedenza, sostanzialmente legati all'accettazione del regime fascista.¹³²

According to Rusconi the idea of victimhood that was fostered by the Italian memory discourse of World War II generated a sense of atonement that responded to the need to tackle an implicit and never openly

¹³⁰ Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppelir*, pp. 143, 261.

¹³¹ Santarelli, 'Muted Violence', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, p. 282.

¹³² Rusconi, *Cefalonia: quando gli italiani si battono* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004) p. 109.

discussed collective sense of guilt for the establishment of the Fascist dictatorship.¹³³

In the formation of this 'patriottismo espiativo' the memory of the Resistance played a key role. In fact, to many of those who took part in it directly, the Resistance appeared as a redemptive opportunity. Many of these men and women were moved, as Zunino puts it, by:

Le ragioni morali di chi ritenne che gli italiani avrebbero dovuto prendere in mano il loro destino ed espiando la solidarietà perpetrata nei quattro lustri di dittatura non dovessero attendere che il futuro del paese calasse dall'alto come un benefico dono mentre loro, gli italiani, potevano starsene in passiva attesa della conclusione della guerra.¹³⁴

In the postwar years the admirable and brave Antifascist choice, which had been made by a restricted group of people, by becoming the foregrounded element of the Italian collective memory of World War II was transformed into a source of atonement and redemption for the entire national community.¹³⁵

Many memory narratives of the Resistance, especially those crafted by political carrier groups, placed strong emphasis on the concepts of sacrifice and atonement and presented the Antifascist war,

¹³³ The idea of 'patriottismo espiativo' was firstly formulated in Rusconi, *Patria e repubblica* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997), pp. 22-23; then was clarified in Rusconi, *Cefalonia*, pp. 107-110. The concept has also been used and discussed by other scholars: see for instance, S. Luzzatto, *Il corpo del duce: un cadavere tra immaginazione, storia e memoria* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998); pp. 185, 194; Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir*, p. 252.

¹³⁴ Zunino, *La Repubblica e il suo passato*, p. 743. This is the reason why Pavone states that 'la resistenza fu tutta un tentativo di fare i conti con il passato', Pavone, *Una guerra civile: saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991), p. 560. See also the reflections by Giacomo Noventa and Vittorio Foa: G. Noventa 'Il significato della resistenza', in Noventa, *Opere complete*, 5 vols (Venice: Marsilio, 1988), III, p. 388; V. Foa, *Il Cavallo e la torre: riflessioni di una vita* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991), p. 138.

¹³⁵ On the restricted nature of the Italian Resistance see Zunino, *La Repubblica e il suo passato*, p. 140; Chiarini, *Alle origini di una strana Repubblica*, p. 64.

more or less implicitly, as a historical event that was able to exculpate the Italians from having established and supported an aggressive undemocratic right-wing dictatorship.¹³⁶ This was, as Focardi argues, 'una visione fuorviante della realtà, che metteva a fuoco solo un lato del comportamento italiano ed estendeva a tutti il merito di una condotta non generalizzabile'.¹³⁷

The formation of a memory discourse centred on the ideas of atonement and redemption had crucial consequences for the way democratic Italy addressed its Fascist past, the Axis War, and the idea of guilt. As Rosario Romeo notes 'i conti col passato fascista furono fatti in Italia assai rapidamente col generale oblio di tutte le responsabilità e di tutte le colpe, presto e universalmente assolte come veniali'.¹³⁸ Indeed, guilt was not put at the centre of the Italian collective memory, but was instead dismissed thanks to memory narratives that focused on the hardship that the Italians faced and on the Antifascist redemptive choice.

¹³⁶ In his study on postwar Italian culture Schwarz offers many examples of this. For instance, during the 'Giornata del Soldato e del Partigiano', celebrated on the 18th of February 1945, Ivanoe Bonomi, prime minister of liberated Italy, declared that a new 'tradizione del sacrificio' had begun and that Italy 'col suo sangue e col suo sacrificio' had deserved the support of other world powers. On the same day Communist politician and partisan Mauro Scoccimarro stated that it was necessary for the Italians to continue their fight against the Germans, in order to 'riscattare le colpe e la vergogna del fascismo'. In an article published in *Avanti!*, on the 28th of April 1945, Socialist leader and partisan Pietro Nenni underlined the redemptive function played by the killing of Mussolini, which 'placherà la memoria di tutti i figli d'Italia che hanno lasciato la loro giovinezza nel deserto sirico, nelle steppe del Don, nelle montagne greche'. In May 1945, in a public speech delivered in Turin, Antifascist intellectual Franco Antonicelli celebrated the war of Resistance against Fascism and argued that 'la copia e la nobiltà del sangue versato riscattano con pienezza venti anni di degradazione'. Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir*, pp. 28, 55-56, 92.

¹³⁷ Focardi, 'Criminali impuniti', in *Crimini di guerra*, p. 174.

¹³⁸ R. Romeo, 'Nazione', in *Enciclopedia del Novecento*, IV (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1979), p. 632. See also Oliva, *Le tre Italie del 1943*; *L'Alibi della Resistenza*, p. 139.

The formation of such a memory discourse, dismissive of any responsibility for Fascism, was, first of all, the result of the dynamics of power that shifted toward Antifascist groups, leading to the formation of dominant memory narratives centred on the perspective of those who had fought in the war of liberation and had travelled from Fascism to Antifascism.

Yet, if in Italy the concepts of sacrifice, redemption, atonement, and conversion offered a framework whereby the events of World War II could be remembered and narrativised, this was not only due to the fact that these categories reflected the experiences of a part of the population that had a strong influence on the formation of the public memory.

As Wertsch has shown, collective memory narratives are usually formed by both 'specific narrative' and 'schematic narrative templates'.¹³⁹ While the former contains information related to the particular event that is remembered, the latter consists of typified narrative structures that relate to the cultural context in which the memory narrative is moulded. Hence, explanations for the relevance that sacrifice and conversion acquired in the Italian memory discourse of World War II must also be sought in the broader sphere of Italian culture.

Scholars of the Italian collective memory have highlighted that the memory discourse that was formed in the postwar years was deeply affected by Catholic culture. Forlenza, Schwarz, and Focardi have all stressed that the formation of memory narratives in accordance with the

¹³⁹ See Chapter One, note 76.

paradigm of the 'patriottismo espiativo' was based on a series of symbols and keywords that were embedded in Christian imagery.¹⁴⁰

The Catholic cultural capital played, indeed, a crucial role in the narrativisation of the events of World War II. After the collapse of the Fascist regime, in an extremely complex moment in which Italian identity underwent a process of redefinition and was renegotiated within and without the public space, Catholicism offered the schematic narrative templates whereby the events of World War II were firstly understood and later remembered. As a result, the Italian memory discourse was informed by numerous concepts belonging to Catholic iconography, such as the notions of sacrifice, redemption, forgiveness, and atonement, which were used to mould memory narratives that were dismissive of the ideas of guilt and personal responsibility.

This is well reflected in the literary vectors of memory of the Axis War, which leave the idea of guilt largely unaddressed, thanks to two masterplots that counteract it by shaping the stories around two central ideas of Christian religion, those of sacrifice and conversion. Through these plots a great part of the texts of the main corpus exonerate the Italians from any serious blame and did not convey on their readers any sense of guilt and responsibility for what the Italians did in World War II as members of the aggressive army of an authoritarian Fascist dictatorship.

¹⁴⁰ Forlenza, 'Sacrificial Memory', *History and Memory*, pp. 76, 78; Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir*, p. 252; Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*, p. xvii.

Epilogue: Exceptions: Facing Guilt, Claiming Responsibility

'Di colpo sentii il suo profumo.
Certo, doveva ungersi i capelli con qualche preziosa pomata [...]
Una pessima pomata, che il caldo di quella valle faceva dolciastra,
putrida di fiori lungamente marciti, un fiato velenoso.
Affrettai il passo, ma la scia di quel fetore mi precedeva'.¹

Introduction

The study of the main topoi, themes, and masterplots of the texts of the main corpus has shown the most recurrent tropes that, at different levels of complexity, mould the narrative discourses of the Italian literature of the Axis War. These reiterative elements, which reverberate from text to text, constitute both broadly accepted representations of the past, affected by the Italian memory discourse of World War II, and typified contents that, because of their widespread circulation, have been repeatedly conveyed to Italian readers.

Yet besides the overbearing depiction developed by these tropes, which fosters an exculpatory representation of the Italian participation in World War II, across the corpus there are also texts that differ from this typified rendering. A first example is offered by a scene in Renzo Renzi's 'L'armata s'agapò', a screenplay that is characterised by what Renzi himself considered a tension between farce and tragedy.²

¹ E. Flaiano, *Tempo di uccidere* (Milan: Bur, 2013), p. 285.

² Renzi, 'L'armata s'agapò', in *Dall'Arcadia a Peschiera*, p. 36.

Initially the text portrays the Italian occupation in Greece 'in chiave di commedia', developing a representation based on the topoi of the Good soldier and of the Army of love, which is in line with previously discussed uses of these topoi. In the last part of the script, though, this comedic tone is replaced by a series of tragic events. Despite the fact that Renzi focuses on several episodes in which the Italians occupy the role of the victims — e.g. suicides of soldiers who cannot go on leave, the 8th of September 1943, the massacre of Cephalonia, the deportations to German POW camps — this final section also reports an episode that within the Italian literature of the Axis War appears unusual. It is the case of the execution of three Greek civilians, two young men and a boy, put to death by an Italian firing squad after the accusation of carrying out partisan activities.³

Although the script somewhat underplays this act of suppression by claiming that the Italians were not as brutal as the Germans, that the war against the guerrilla did not have a serious scope, and that such executions took place only sporadically, it cannot be denied that this scene reveals the Italian role as an oppressive force of occupation. Given the presence of this passage, Ellena points out that Renzi's script presents both self-exculpatory moments and scenes that could encourage the development of a reflection on Italy's responsibility.⁴

While 'L'armata s'agapò' presents a single scene that diverges from the most typified and common ways of portraying the Italian participation

³ Ibid., pp. 38-39.

⁴ Ellena also stresses, though, that only the self-absolving moments proved to be productive within Italian culture, Ellena, 'Guerre fasciste', in *Crimini di guerra*, p. 207.

in the Axis War, three texts mark a more significant departure from the dominant depiction: these narratives are Pirro's *Le soldatesse*, Terrosi's *La casa di Novach*, and Lunardi's *Diario di un soldato semplice*. The analysis will show that these novels do not break completely with the rest of the corpus, since all of them make extensive use of many of the recurrent tropes that characterise the literature of the Axis War, from the topoi to the masterplots. What makes these text different, however, is the importance that they place on the theme of guilt, which results in a complication of the masterplots of sacrifice and conversion.

6.1 Guilt within the Masterplot of Conversion

Pirro's *Le soldatesse* and Terrosi's *La casa di Novach* were both published by Feltrinelli in 1956, as part of the series of books 'Scrittori d'oggi' — also known as 'serie grigia' for the colour of their covers — which, at that time, was edited by Luciano Bianciardi.⁵ The autodiegetic narrator of *La casa di Novach* is a young Italian grenadier, modelled on and named after the author himself, who serves in Italian-occupied Slovenia. In the first part of the story Mario appears as a convinced supporter of the war: he believes in the necessity of winning and he despises soldiers who show

⁵ M. Mazza, 'Il lavoro redazionale di Luciano Bianciardi', *La fabbrica del libro*, 1 (2008) 19-24. See also Mazza, *I fannulloni frenetici: Luciano Bianciardi e l'industria editoriale* (Ghezzano: Felici, 2009), pp. 35-58.

indifference or criticise the war effort.⁶ From this initial position, though, the protagonist undertakes a formative journey, which leads him to change his view and to reject Italy's imperialistic war.

The autodiegetic narrator of *Le soldatesse* does not show at any time the enthusiasm and favour towards the war that characterise the soldier Terrosi, but nonetheless at the beginning of the novel he seems to comply well with the military life. In particular he seems to appreciate the position of power he has as an occupier: for instance, he likes speaking with an Orthodox pope, since this makes him feel 'il raro piacere di sentirmi vincitore', giving him 'una sensazione magnifica'.⁷ With the unfolding of the story, though, his positive view of his role as an occupier changes and by the end of the novel the officer criticises the Axis War, and develops an Antifascist stance.

As these brief summaries show both *Le soldatesse* and *La casa di Novach* present a narrative progression that is shaped by the masterplot of conversion. Both novels tell the story of an Italian soldier who, through direct experience of the occupation, develops a disapproval of his own role as an occupier and a rejection of both Fascism and its wars. However, these two stories differ in a significant way from other cases previously studied, since in these texts the masterplot of conversion is articulated in a close dialogue with the theme of guilt.

A first element that contributes to the articulation of this theme is the topos of the Sagapò army. Although both books present scenes in

⁶ See Terrosi, *La casa di Novach*, pp. 55-56, 60, 62-63.

⁷ Pirro, *Le soldatesse*, p. 76.

which this topos works consistently with the rest of the corpus, as a sign of the unwarlike nature of the Italians, the two texts also make a different use of it. In fact, the representation of inter-gender relations at the time of the occupation becomes the occasion for showing the subjecting power of the Italian occupiers, as it is exercised on the bodies of local women. These depictions change the meaning of the topos of the Sagapò army, which from being a self-exculpatory trope becomes a means to reveal the oppressive power of the Italians, triggering in the protagonists a reflection on their own responsibility.

For instance, already at the beginning of *Le soldatesse*, the narrator, while describing the military brothels that have been set up in empty bourgeois houses, reveals that those places:

Lasciavano sempre il disagio di sentirsi degli intrusi; ci si sentiva in colpa come se ci s'infilasse in un postribolo di Napoli o di Roma con la tessera d'identità alterata di quel tanto che bastasse a darci, per una sera, i diciott'anni richiesti dalla legge.⁸

The visits to the military brothels generate a sense of uneasiness and unentitlement, which are early hints of the perturbation that the protagonist feels as an occupier who takes advantages of a land his country has conquered.

Later in the story, while travelling across Greece with the group of young prostitutes the narrator arrives in Chalcis. Here he meets

⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

Lieutenant Testa who, while welcoming him, checks the newly arrived girls:

Con una falsa indifferenza cercava le ragazze più in carne, parlava di tante cose, senza ordine, e allungava, con la sicurezza che solo dà il lungo mestiere e l'abitudine, le mani sui seni delle ragazze o sotto le vesti fino alle cosce e alle natiche. Sembrava uno di quegli uomini che girano le nostre campagne a cercare il pollame.⁹

The objectifying and disrespectful way in which Testa treats the girls, and the crude simile comparing women to animal flesh, reveal the oppressive and dominant behaviour of the Italian occupiers. In particular, the acknowledgment that these acts are the result of long established habits makes this sexist conduct appear entrenched in the ways the Italians treat women and exercise power.

In fact, during his journey across Greece the protagonist witnesses other episodes whereby many of his fellow countrymen take advantage of Greek women.¹⁰ Despite the awkward sense of uneasiness and shame that the man feels in all these situations, these behaviours appear to him so embedded in the Italian interpretation of the role of occupier that he himself feels compelled to follow the same conduct. Hence, the first time he sits inside the van next to one of the Greek prostitutes he forces himself to act in the same disrespectful way in which he saw so many of his companions behaving:

⁹ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁰ The most abusive one, even if represented in an implicit way and narrated in lighthearted tones, concerns the Fascist major who travels with the protagonist who, during a stay in the house of an Orthodox pope, forces his way into the bedroom and rapes the pope's wife, Ibid., pp. 80-81.

Il disagio mi cresceva, capii che solo un gesto volgare poteva farmi rientrare nel mio ruolo, allungai la mano e le accarezzai le cosce fino all'orlo delle mutandine, e Tula ne fu rinfrancata, scoppiò a cantare, con la noncuranza della puttana.¹¹

Despite the apparently unconcerned reaction of the woman, who does not seem to qualify his actions as particularly offensive or outrageous, the protagonist's concern casts light on the repressive nature of these gestures, which are made possible only by the position of power that the Italians have as an occupying force.

In *La casa di Novach*, too, the topos of the Sagapò army is used to reveal the Italian position of power. In fact, it is only after the soldier Terrosi, together with his fellow soldier Gemelli, sleeps with a Slovenian prostitute that he starts to become aware of his role as occupier:

'Sai, toscà, cosa mi ha detto quella mentre pagavo? Mi ha detto: "A voi italiani io dare il corpo, il cuore no..." Lo gettasse ai cani, il cuore suo, la zoccola!' 'Anche a me l'ha detto' risposi. Era vero. E neanche a me importava tanto del cuore di una prostituta. Ma quella faccenda del cuore e del corpo mi restò impressa. Perché significava qualcosa. Qualcosa che non potevo capire in quel momento, quella sera [...] Ma ci ripensavo: ci pensai tutta la notte.¹²

The words of the prostitute underline that if Italian soldiers can sleep with her it is only as a result of the misery caused by the war. The woman is not charmed by any alleged quality of the Italians and has no feelings for them; she simply uses her body to gain money and survive the deprivations brought by the Italian invasion. Her words affect Mario and

¹¹ Ibid., p. 37.

¹² Terrosi, *La casa di Novach*, p. 31.

start to occupy his mind, triggering a burgeoning burden for his participation in a war of aggression.

Later in the story Mario will see that same woman again. One night he suddenly wakes up, hearing fighting, gunfire, and explosions; he runs out of his tent and observes a series of figures moving confusedly in the dark: they are other Italian soldiers who initially seek shelter from the enemy's bullets and then move to the counterattack. What has happened becomes clearer only with the first light of the following morning:

L'indomani all'alba, a pochi metri dalle postazioni furono rinvenuti alcuni morti. Gli uomini, alcuni dei quali vestiti con logore uniformi dell'ex esercito jugoslavo, avevano lunghe barbe rossicce e apparivano molto giovani. Le donne, anch'esse giovani, vestivano giubbotti di pelle e pantaloni di tela azzurri.¹³

In the night scene, by restricting the narration to the narrator's point of view, Terrosi did not portray the Italian acts of killing, which remained confined in implicit gaps opened by paralipses. As in other cases previously discussed, it is thanks to the portrayal of the enemies' dead bodies that this implicit violence emerges. This time, however, this representation does not limit itself to reporting the presence of anonymous corpses, as among them is also the prostitute that Mario encountered before:

In una di loro riconobbi la ragazza che una sera, Gemelli e io avevamo incontrato nel buio marciapiede di una traversa [...] una partigiana morta insieme ad altre partigiane, freddata dal

¹³ Ibid., p. 134.

piombo di quei soldati a cui lei, come a Gemelli e a me, aveva detto di donare il corpo ma il cuore no.¹⁴

This woman is more than a corpse used to reveal the Italian violence: she is a person whom Mario and the readers have already met, and who had pushed the narrator to reflect on the responsibility he bears for his own actions in the occupation. Her death, caused by those with whom she had to sleep, gives concreteness to Mario's previously imprecise sense of guilt, establishing a relation between military repression and the sexual advantages that the Italians took over subordinate women of the lands they occupied.

In *Le soldatesse* and *La casa di Novach* the topos of the Sagapò army sheds light on the repressive nature of the Italian occupation and offers an occasion for thematizing the protagonists' sense of guilt. Yet if guilt becomes a crucial theme in both these novels it is due to the fact that this idea is not simply touched upon by a few scenes, but is progressively constructed throughout the story. In the articulation of this theme the representation of Italian violence plays a particularly paramount role.

La casa di Novach is undoubtedly the novel in which Italian violence emerges in ways not comparable to any other text of the Axis War literature. Throughout the story the Italians are shown approaching the people of the occupied area with disdain; carrying out stop-and-search operations; arresting people suspected of involvement with the local Resistance movement; searching the houses of the Slovenians;

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 134.

beating up suspects that were arrested; and killing members of the guerrilla forces. Although some of these representations are tamed by the topos of the Good Italian, the text offers a more complete depiction of what the Italian occupation actually entailed.

It is especially in the chapters devoted to the anti-partisan operations that the Italian violence becomes manifest. In the first part of the book the protagonist's battalion attacks a village where a group of partisans found shelter. The representation of this war action is once again restrained by the language of silence: the assault is described from the perspective of Mario who, as a member of an artillery unit, follows the events from a distance; hence, nothing of what happens in the village, which is covered by clouds of smoke, can be represented, remaining confined in textual gaps.

Yet, when his unit enters the hamlet, Mario can finally observe the ruins of the buildings they have destroyed. While all around him Italian soldiers ransack the houses, looking for food, Mario reflects on the unjust nature of their action and, in the conclusion of the chapter, he makes a desolate reflection:

Guardai le case e i grossi cumuli di macerie che case non erano più. Guardai d'ognintorno, ma non vidi un uomo, una sposa, un bambino. I vivi si erano dati alla fuga, come i partigiani; i morti non si facevano vedere, seppelliti tra le rovine delle loro case. E pensando ai morti [...] sentivo solo voglia di piangere.¹⁵

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 72.

Through a cataphasis that mentions what the narrator has not directly described, the conclusion of the chapter reveals the presence of dead bodies in the houses destroyed by the Italians. This final allusion to the dead Slovenians connotes the gaps that have covered the moments of killing as implicit ones, generating a transitive silence. In fact, contrary to many other cases, this implicit representation does not divert the attention of the readers from the Italian killing, but guides it towards it. In this way the murderous nature of the assault is disclosed and the Italian use of violence highlighted.

The recognition of the Italian use of violence leads the way to the articulation of the theme of guilt. While looking at the ruins of the Slovenian houses he contributed to destroying, Terrosi feels culpable, as is clearly indicated by his desire to cry. This sense of guilt can be read both as a form of moral guilt, due to the military action in which he was personally involved, and as a political one, due to the repression of an occupied population.

Violence and guilt reappear paired together in the last part of the novel, when Mario takes part in another long anti-partisan operation. Even in this case the episode is tamed by the language of silence: no acts of killing are represented and, despite the fact that on several occasions the Italians destroy Slovenian villages with flame-throwers, no one seems to be killed in the process, as all the houses appear uninhabited.¹⁶ It is only due to subsequent allusions that readers are able to construe what

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 121-123, 129-130, 160-161.

remained implicit in these depictions: the fact that that during these military actions several Slovenians have also been killed.

In fact, during a period of leave in his hometown, Mario is taken by remorse and asks himself how he could go back to Yugoslavia 'a braccare, a uccidere la gente'.¹⁷ The same expression reappears in a meditation at the end of the novel: when the protagonist's battalion is about to be moved to Croatia, Mario, unable to fall asleep, thinks that he is tired of starting over again in another country, having to go back 'a braccare, a uccidere altra gente, la gente che non odiavo'.¹⁸ This reiterated reflection foregrounds Mario's moral guilt for the military actions in which he took part and in which he had to kill local partisans and civilians that were caught up in the operations of suppression.

La casa di Novach illustrates well the dual correspondence existing between representations of violence and the articulation of a theme of guilt. Despite the fact that the representations of the Italian anti-partisan operations do not show the actual moments of killing, the murderous nature of these actions emerges at the implicit level, thanks to the protagonist's reflections on his sense of guilt. The use of violence triggers guilt that, in reverse, clarifies the representation of violence. In this way the silence that conceals the actual killings generates a transitive effect and the repressive character of the Italian occupation is disclosed.

The sense of moral guilt for the repressive operations in which he took part and the sense of political guilt for the imperialistic war that Italy

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 180.

has carried out have a crucial impact on Mario's conscience and engender an ideological transformation:

Quanto c'era voluto ad arrivare fin qui: a capire! Avevo dovuto battere il capo in mille cose, soffrire la fame, vivere in mezzo all'odio della gente [...] per calcolare la portata tragica dell'errore in cui eravamo stati trascinati tutti. 'Andremo in malora! Andremo a finir tutti copai!' era tornato a ripetere Sbrossio. Ma questa volta non lo avevo rimproverato, perché io stesso mi sentivo preda della medesima angoscia.¹⁹

In this passage Mario recognises, similarly to the protagonists of other texts of the corpus, the mistaken nature of the Axis War. This new awareness is the starting point of an ideological transformation that, by the end of the book, leads him to reject warfare, embrace a pacifist stance, and repudiate Fascism.

In *Le soldatesse*, too, violence and guilt are closely related, engendering the ideological transformation of the protagonist. During the journey across central Greece, the narrator and his companions, i.e. the driver Esposito, a Fascist major, and the Greek prostitutes, pass through several areas where partisan formations operate. Here they witness two military acts of suppression carried out by the Italian cavalry and a unit of the Carabinieri Force, who destroy two Greek villages.²⁰

During the latter oppressive operation two men are arrested for illegal possession of weapons, are accused of partisan activity, and are sentenced to death on the spot:

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 126.

²⁰ Pirro, *Le soldatesse*, pp. 88, 110.

Uno era giovane, aveva i miei anni: ventidue. L'altro poteva essere mio padre, aveva una folta capigliatura bianca e il viso rugoso e cotto di contadino. [...] Non avevo mai visto né immaginato una fucilazione. Il tenente dei carabinieri schierò il plotone. I due condannati non vollero bendarsi gli occhi, ma accettarono di sedersi su due vecchi sgabelli [...] Subito dopo la scarica li raggiunse, si piegarono sulla sedia a vivere l'ultimo respiro e poi caddero nella polvere.²¹

In this passage, not only is the violence of the occupation openly disclosed, but through a comparison between the two men sentenced to death and the protagonist and his father, the narrator begins a process of identification with the victims of the Italian repression.

As the story approaches its conclusion, this sense of proximity to the Greeks increases. This new sensibility reinforces the relationship with Eftichia, the young prostitute whom the narrator has liked since the first time they met, but who has always resisted the man's romantic attentions. However, now that the protagonist has empathised with the sufferings of the Greek people, love between them becomes possible and, on the last day of their journey, the two spend the night together.

This event constitutes a crucial moment in the protagonist's evolution. The morning after the narrator looks at the war and the occupation with new eyes:

Non mi faceva neanche spavento accorgermi che ormai nemmeno per un attimo Eftichia poteva essere una nemica. E non era tutto: giù nella strada passavano i contadini sugli asini sovraccarichi di legna fresche ed io li guardavo come se venissero dai miei paesi. Mi ritirai nella penombra quando comparve la ronda dei carabinieri, come se non fosse gente mia. E mi sembrò naturale. Quando Eftichia si svegliò, le bastò

²¹ Ibid., pp. 113-115.

guardarmi per comprendere. Spalancò la finestra e bestemmiò contro le camicie nere che passavano cantando.²²

The protagonist can no longer identify with the goals of the occupiers and feels a growing sense of distance from his fellow countrymen, represented by the policemen who pass nearby. This relatively abrupt and unsophisticated transformation leads to the development of an Antifascist position, as Eftichia yelling at a group of Black-Shirts immediately underlines.

After having witnessed the military repression of the local guerrilla, the execution of Greek citizens, and the sufferings that the Italians caused to local women, the narrator feels the need to show his opposition towards the war and those who support it. Hence, at the end of the book, when he returns to the base camp, rather than spending time with his previous companions, he begins to have meals together with officers Cecafo and Pinzauti, two officers who are well known for their Antifascism.²³

In both *Le soldatesse* and *La casa di Novach* the protagonist's development of an anti-war and Antifascist conscience is not triggered by the sufferings experienced during the badly-managed Fascist War, nor by the experience of defeat, nor by the discovery of German violence; by contrast, at the centre of this process is the acknowledgement of the oppressive nature of the Italian occupation and the sense of guilt that this awareness generates.

²² Ibid., pp. 136-137.

²³ Ibid., p. 153.

The centrality that the theme of guilt acquires in these narratives is due to the fact that, while other texts of the corpus briefly address only the political guilt that an innocent Italian feels in relation to the unjust nature of the Axis War, in these two novels the idea of a personal moral guilt is also put forward. In fact, in *La casa di Novach* Mario's sense of guilt stems not only from the violent deeds that he sees other Italians committing, but also from a meditation on his own actions. In *Le soldatesse*, despite the fact that the protagonist does not commit any act of violence — and, therefore, the sense of guilt he develops is mainly a political one — there is an important passage that also constructs the idea of his individual moral guilt.

After the night spent together with the protagonist, Eftichia leaves Volos and tries to reach a partisan squad. The narrator, together with another prostitute, thus decides to write on a wall a propitiatory farewell to the woman. This moment becomes the occasion for the protagonist to confess his own guilt:

Fra tutti i pensieri che mi bruciavano dentro e che mi riempivano di vergogna io scelsi quello che assolutamente non potevo più oltre tacere senza essere degno di tutto il suo disprezzo. Strappai un pezzo di carbone dalle mani di Penelope e scrissi in italiano: 'A Patrasso ho pagato una notte d'amore con una pagnotta. Te ne chiedo scusa. Buona fortuna, Eftichia'.²⁴

These words reveal the sense of moral guilt that the narrator feels for having used his own power to take advantage of a poor Greek woman.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 142.

Importantly, this moment of avowal and contrition is not followed by any act of forgiveness pronounced by the victim. The passage, thus, does not offer an occasion to exonerate the protagonist from his own guilt through an absolution; but rather to underline his fault and recognise his agency. Thanks to this avowal the narrator shows that his sense of culpability does not depend only on what his fellow countrymen did, but also on the acts he personally committed.

The open and thorough thematisation of guilt also affects the conclusion of the stories and the redemptive function of the masterplot of conversion. At the end of *Le soldatesse*, after the protagonist has openly professed his Antifascist choice, the news of the Axis conquest of Tobruk reaches the military canteen in which all the officers are having lunch. All of the Italians, except the protagonist and his new companions, celebrate the event with enthusiasm. The episode triggers in the narrator a desolate reflection:

A me veniva da piangere, mi sarebbe in fondo piaciuto festeggiare con gli altri quella vittoria, ma ormai avvertivo che non era una vittoria, perché qualcosa crollava intorno a noi anche in quel giorno [...] Quando la calma tornò, noi tre parlavamo sottovoce e tutti sentivano rabbia, come se il nostro scetticismo li defraudasse dalla ingenua speranza di un felice e vittorioso ritorno.²⁵

The novel ends here, with the protagonist's prediction of the inevitable downfall of the Italian army, and his reflection on the painful sense of detachment that he feels towards the other Italian soldiers. This gloomy

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 155-156.

conclusion appears deprived of the sense of rebirth and redemption that in many other texts is produced by the masterplot of conversion. In this way *Le soldatesse*, while affirming the moral necessity of the Antifascist choice, does not use this ideological transformation as an event that can counteract the sense of guilt developed through the story.

Similarly, in the conclusion of *La casa di Novach*, Mario, having developed a pacifist stance, is tempted to desert the army. On the last night before his regiment has to move to Croatia, he is not able to sleep, overwhelmed by his own thoughts: as a soldier of the Italian army he feels obliged to continue the war; however, after having taken part in many operations of repression, he knows the wrongdoings the Italians have committed. Unable to sleep he thinks about all the people that he saw dying during the war — both Slovenian and Italian— and reflects on the possibility of deserting and hiding in the house of his friend Viktor Novach:

Pensavo ai morti e ai vivi [...] Pensavo al mio domani e al domani di tutti gli uomini. Allora sentii molto forte la voglia di correre verso il villaggio e di fermarmi a una casa amica, alla casa di Viktor Novach.²⁶

The novel ends on this reflection: Mario seems ready to escape from the unjust war that the Italians are fighting. This decision, however, does not take place within the diegetic world of the text. Hence, it is open to interpretation whether Mario will follow this impulse and desert the army

²⁶ Terrosi, *La casa di Novach*, p. 180.

or if this idea will remain only the idealistic desire of escapism made by a soldier in crisis, during a worrisome night.

Given the impossibility to tell what will happen next, the conclusion of *La casa di Novach*, rather than foregrounding the redemptive power of the Antifascist choice, emphasises the intense remorse that affects Mario's conscience after the man has recognised the wrongful nature of the war that he has been fighting for his country.

The protagonists of both *Le soldatesse* and *La casa di Novach* recognise that the Axis War was a mistake, acknowledge their own responsibility in it, and understand the necessity of embracing Antifascism. Yet, the protagonists' awareness of their own guilt interacts with the redemptive pattern generally developed by the masterplot. The conclusions of the two stories do not emphasise the palingenetic power of the Antifascist conversion, but instead highlight the internal conflict that troubles the conscience of the main characters.

In this way the redemptive power of the masterplot is limited and the sense of guilt that was constructed throughout the stories is not neutralised. Since it is not resolved within the diegetic world of the texts, guilt survives as a burden that haunts the main character and is powerfully communicated to the readers.

6.2 Guilt within the Masterplot of Sacrifice

Lunardi's *Diario di un soldato semplice*, published in 1952 in Vittorini's edited series 'I Gettoni', is a text formed by two stories, 'Mizzi' and 'Il prete Momcilo', set in Italian-occupied Slovenia and Croatia. This final section will focus on the first story, which presents a masterplot of sacrifice developed in close connection with the articulation of the theme of guilt.

The first part of *Diario di un soldato semplice* relates the story of an unnamed Italian Lieutenant, the autodiegetic narrator, who, during his service in occupied Slovenia, develops a strong attraction towards a young woman, Mizzi, who works as a waitress in an inn. Another officer, Captain Derrico, begins to court the young girl, in order to irritate the narrator. In spite of the relative unimportance that the two men confer on Mizzi — both of them see other women — and despite the fact that she has no intercourse with them, the attentions that she receives from the two Italians do not go unnoticed by members of the local community. One day, as the protagonist will discover from a friend of the girl, a group of Slovenians accuses Mizzi of collaboration with the enemy and, after a show trial, they kill her.

What begins as the story of an affair, an episode that seems to follow the topos of the Sagapò army, becomes a tragic narrative that revolves around the sense of guilt that the narrator feels after the death of the innocent Slovenian. In fact, the protagonist becomes obsessed with Mizzi's death and the story assumes the form of a moral quest — Carlo Bo calls it an 'autobiografia morale' — that follows the reflections of the

narrator who attempts to establish who holds responsibility for the murder.²⁷

The protagonist soon realises, though, that establishing who is the real culprit is not an easy task, given the many parties involved in the fact: 'Chi aveva ucciso Mizzi? Il signor Kocenar o il capitano Derrico? Oppure ero stato io stesso?'.²⁸ Guilt, indeed, is a multifaceted phenomenon, which possesses different shades. While the Slovenians, led by Mr Kocenar, the owner of the inn where the girl worked, are guilty in a criminal sense, as the actual perpetrators of the murder, the narrator feels that, at the same time, both himself and Captain Derrico hold a moral responsibility.

As a result of the entanglement of different types of guilt, according to which numerous people can be responsible in different ways for the same event, without the possibility of identifying a clear culprit, the protagonist also considers the eventuality of a universal form of guilt, according to which everyone is equally guilty: 'o eravamo stati tutti a ucciderla ed ella non era che la vittima innocente di tutti?'.²⁹

The idea of a collective unspecific guilt, however, is rapidly dismissed. When he arrives at the base camp and reports what happened to Captain Derrico, the narrator chooses both to affirm his own guilt and diplomatically to accuse his superior:

Poi dissi che noi stessi (e allusi chiaramente a me stesso e al capitano Derrico) eravamo stati ad ucciderla con le nostre

²⁷ C. Bo, 'Diario di un soldato semplice', *La fiera letteraria*, 10th of August (1952), p. 5.

²⁸ Lunardi, *Diario di un soldato semplice*, p. 77.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

insistenze. Le ultime visite poi (allusi a quelle del capitano) avevano provocato la sua condanna.³⁰

After this calculated statement, in which both the protagonist's and the Captain's responsibilities are highlighted, the narrator realises, however, that not only does Derrico not share his sense of guilt, but he does not even notice his veiled accusations.

The Captain does not care about the murder of the girl, as he thinks that she is just one less enemy: 'uno di meno, se mai'.³¹ By contrast, Derrico and the other Lieutenants appear extremely interested in the process that led to the death of the girl, since this event reveals the Slovenian hostility towards the Italians and the existence of some kind of organised Resistance.

As a result, the protagonist remains the only person who feels tormented by the death of Mizzi. Disgusted by the reaction of his superior and fellow officers, the narrator becomes more and more convinced of the fact that Derrico holds responsibility for what happened to the girl. Afflicted and distressed by the torment that this story has generated in his conscience, he feels the need to speak about it with someone and, despite being non-religious, he decides to go to see the military chaplain.

The priest tries to comfort the protagonist and alleviates his remorse, but, at the same time, underlines his bias against Captain Derrico, highlighting that his accusation stems from the attempt to evade his own responsibility:

³⁰ Ibid., p. 81.

³¹ Ibid., p. 82.

'In fondo' diceva ancora, 'perché non voi e solo il capitano Derrico dovrebbe essere il responsabile ? o, comunque perché egli più di voi? Vedete bene che aumentando la sua colpa non fate che diminuire la vostra e dimostrate che, più della giustizia, tenete a scagionare la vostra persona. Il capitano Derrico almeno non si preoccupa di accusare voi, ma misconosce semplicemente il fatto. Il che in guerra è oltretutto più logico.³²

The chaplain detects that in the narrator's obsessive search for a culprit, the certainty of Derrico's culpability is affected by a scapegoating mechanism. By accusing the Captain of holding responsibility for the death of Mizzi, the narrator diverts guilt from himself, projecting it onto Derrico.

While the priest unmasks this fact, he also endorses the idea that asking questions of culpability for the death of a girl during a war is not a task worth pursuing. He states that:

Pensate alle migliaia di morti e ditemi se metta poi conto di prendersela troppo per una ragazza di più morta. Considerato poi che dove non arriva la giustizia degli uomini arriva quella di Dio [...] Perché vorreste discutere di ciò che non saprete e che nessuno saprà mai, di ciò che Dio solo nella sua misericordia sa. Non verreste a capo di niente.³³

In the chaplain's view the death of Mizzi is a trivial fact within the context of World War II. Moreover, the intricate question of who is actually responsible for the murder is a matter that only the omniscience of God could resolve. In the figure of the priest Lunardi embodies a perspective,

³² Ibid., pp. 87-88.

³³ Ibid., p. 88.

nurtured by Catholic culture, that, by offering a series of absolving strategies, diverts attention from the issues of individual responsibility.

Yet the meeting with the chaplain is nonetheless fruitful for the protagonist who realises that the accusations against Derrico were biased, since they were due to an urge to find a single culprit for an event that was much more complex:

Il mio errore era quello di credere che tutto ciò che accade debba avere un colpevole diretto, e che di quella azione contro Mizzi non potessi incolpare che il capitano Derrico; ma ora forse vedo, e in questo sono stato illuminato dal Cappellano, quanto non più egli di altri era responsabile.³⁴

Thanks to the chaplain the scapegoat mechanism that affected the protagonist's search for a culprit has been prevented. This does not mean, however, that the man is ready to abandon his enquiry to the idea that, as the priest suggested, looking for who holds responsibility is a useless task, since God will provide justice in the afterlife. By contrast, the narrator is extremely critical of such a perspective:

Ma cos'erano poi il senso pratico del capitano Derrico e la fede nella giustizia divina del Cappellano, se non l'uno e l'altra evasione dai doveri più profondi umani? L'uno brutalmente li sconosceva perché non arrivavano fino alla sua coscienza, l'altro li evadeva per deferirli alla giustizia divina.³⁵

In Derrico's disinterest in the death of Mizzi and in the view endorsed by the chaplain, the protagonist of Lunardi's story recognises a common attitude that leads to nullifying and evading individual responsibility. This

³⁴ Ibid., p. 90.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 89.

behaviour appears unacceptable to him; hence, in the conclusion of the story, the man decides to follow the only route that remains open: facing his own sense of guilt and claiming responsibility for what happened to Mizzi.

This resolution is developed in the last chapter of the story. The protagonist decides to go and look for the body of the girl, in order to bury her. One morning, he leaves the camp with two soldiers he trusts and who are unaware of the nature of their mission and heads to an area along the river, where a friend of Mizzi claims that the girl was killed. While walking in search of the body, the narrator no longer seeks other people that could be considered accountable for the death of the girl; by contrast, he points to his own responsibility and lets his sense of guilt clearly emerge:

Per la strada che percorrevo in un pesante silenzio, il mio pensiero era costantemente rivolto a lei, e mano mano che mi avvicinavo al luogo dove ella doveva trovarsi, sentivo nuovamente riaccendersi il rimorso, e riaffiorare l'affetto per lei insieme con una grande ansia, come fossi inseguito da un vago sentimento di colpa e di paura. Ora mi veniva alla mente il passato e che io e non altri che io avevo provocato la sua morte.³⁶

After a while the group finds her: Mizzi had been tied to a stone and drowned in the river.

The two soldiers are quite shocked by this discovery; they know that the officer was attracted to the girl and they imagine that there was probably some relationship between them; moreover they do not understand how it is possible that he knew where the body was. The

³⁶ Ibid., p. 95.

narrator understands that they begin to suspect that he must have been involved in the murder. Yet, he does nothing to exculpate himself, but remains in silence, reinforcing the soldiers' suppositions:

Giovanni specialmente era il più addolorato e con insistenza sembrava quasi mi pregasse di parlare, perché io spiegassi e mi scolpassi, giacché non avrebbe creduto mai possibile che io potessi giungere a tanto; [...] e io avvaloravo con il mio silenzio e il mio smarrimento i suoi dubbi e la sua delusione che dovevano essere assai grandi.³⁷

Although he did not kill Mizzi, the officer knows that he holds partial responsibility for her death and feels, therefore, morally responsible for the killing. Having stopped looking for other people to accuse and having rejected explanations that could become ways of avoiding his own guilt, the protagonist accepts being seen as the actual culprit of the murder. In this way, by appearing guilty for Mizzi's death in the eyes of his soldiers, the narrator manages to obtain what he wants: the social recognition of his own responsibility.

Thanks to the final choice made by the protagonist, the first story of *Diario di un soldato semplice* assumes a pattern of narrative progression that fits into the masterplot of sacrifice. In fact, the story focuses on the protagonist's suffering, culminating in a final climax that brings the narrative to its conclusion. This time the suffering the protagonist experiences is not physical, but psychological, since it stems from the remorse that tortures his conscience; similarly, the final act of

³⁷ Ibid., p. 97.

sacrifice does not involve bodily agonies caused by the war, but the acceptance of the blame for a crime that he did not directly commit.

Yet the open and complex thematisation throughout the story of the protagonist's sense of guilt drastically alters the effect of atonement that this masterplot generally produces. While in other texts of the corpus the story's narrative progression transforms the pains of the Italian soldiers into a source of atonement that hides and displaces any question of guilt, in 'Mizzi' the final sacrifice of the protagonist, who decides to claim his part of responsibility for the killing of the girl, does not nullify, but gives emphasis to guilt.

Whether this final act of sacrifice possesses an expiating function through which the narrator can atone for his wrongdoing and resolves his remorse remains debatable. What is crucial is the fact that the story's sacrificial pattern does not lead to the dismissal of individual responsibility; by contrast, through his final sacrifice the narrator shows that he has decided to bear responsibility for what happened.

While other texts across the corpus highlight Italian political guilt and discharge the idea of the individual responsibility of the main characters, in *Diario di un soldato semplice* Lunardi chooses to foreground the individual guilt of the protagonist, which becomes the focal point of the narrative.³⁸ By highlighting the moral guilt of the narrator for what he did during the war, the issue of the Italian political guilt for having carried out a war of aggression is also implicitly put forward, since it is only as a

³⁸ In this choice Lunardi's text could be fruitfully compared to Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere*.

consequence of the military invasion of Slovenia that Mizzi was caught up between the sexual desires of the invaders and the vengeful retaliations of the locals.

Moreover, at the beginning of the story there is an episode that contributes, too, to foregrounding Italian political guilt: a group of young Slovenians, probably associated with the local Resistance, are killed by a squad of Italian soldiers that set the house where they were hiding on fire, and let them die inside. This horrific act of killing is only indirectly, and almost casually, reported by the autodiegetic narrator, who merges this episode with the recollection of a past tragedy that occurred in his hometown, where two boys happened to die when their shack caught fire.³⁹

Despite the scarce attention that it seems to receive, the event — the only one, besides Mizzi's death, that deals with violence — has an important function in the structure of the story. This awful episode breaks the topos of the Good Italian, showing the oppressive and violent nature of the occupation, and appears ineluctably connected with the protagonist's development of a sense of guilt. In fact, while in the case of Mizzi's death, it is clear that the Italians have only an indirect responsibility, the protagonist — and, importantly, the readers as well — knows that in relation to other events the Italians have done things no less brutal than killing a young girl, for which they hold direct and complete culpability.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

The protagonist's final decision to emphasise his sense of moral guilt for the death of the girl becomes, therefore, a broader claim for the necessity of recognizing the individual responsibility that human beings have in a war, including that concerning the repression and killing of local people, as in the case of the Slovenians killed in the fire.

Conclusion

Terrosi's, Pirro's and Lunardi's texts tell stories that foreground the idea of guilt by focusing on the protagonists' feelings of personal culpability. The importance that guilt acquires in these narratives has not passed unnoticed by some scholars who, however, have not underlined how this constitutes a peculiarity in comparison to other representations of the Axis War.⁴⁰

These books represent three exceptions to the dominant representation conveyed by the texts of the main corpus. These three narratives do not exonerate the Italians from their responsibility and do not look for easy targets — such as the Germans, or the Fascists — that could be made accountable for the wrongdoings that occurred during the

⁴⁰ Antonello Ricci has spoken about an 'inestirpabile senso di colpa' that pervades *La casa di Novach*; similarly Giulio Manacorda has pointed out that Terrosi's novel testifies to the fact that 'per molti combattenti italiani la guerra fu una tormentosa conquista della coscienza di essere irrimediabilmente dalla parte del torto'; Andrea Camilleri has instead stressed that the journey of Pirro's protagonist across Italian-occupied Greece 'diventa un lungo viaggio dentro la coscienza': A. Ricci, "'Bianciardi com'era' di Mario Terrosi: Questo 'lavoro culturale' non s'ha da fare", *Le reti di Dedalus*, May (2006) 1-4 (p. 4); Manacorda, 'Narrativa e memorialistica di guerra', in *Storia della Letteratura italiana contemporanea*, p. 303; A. Camilleri, 'Postfazione', in Pirro, *Le soldatesse*, p. 163.

war. Instead, they disclose the Italian role as perpetrators of violence, convey to their readers the sense of guilt that dominates their protagonists, and, by doing so, foster the necessity of taking on responsibility.

The three narratives considered in this chapter develop a representation of the Axis War that could have helped the formation of a responsible memory of the past. Alexander argues that the identification with the perpetrators through the lens of cultural depiction can help readers to put in place processes of 'internalization rather than projection, acceptance rather than displacement', which can facilitate the formation of a culture of moral responsibility.⁴¹

A narrativisation of this kind, however, has been in the minority not only among the vectors of memory of the Axis War, but also across Italian culture overall. As Borgomaneri has stressed, self-absolving narratives about the past have dominated Italian culture and have prevented, 'insieme alla elaborazione critica del passato, la costruzione di una identità responsabile'.⁴² Writing in 2006 about the Italian interpretation of the Fascist past and the general ignorance of the Italian war crimes, Borgomaneri denounces the absence in Italy, throughout the decades, of narratives about the past that could foster ideas of guilt and responsibility:

Grazie a una indulgente rilettura della storia ci siamo sottratti
a ogni responsabilità autorappresentandoci come un popolo

⁴¹ Alexander, 'On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The "Holocaust" from War Crime to Trauma Drama', in *Cultural Trauma*, p. 227.

⁴² Borgomaneri, 'Introduzione', in *Crimini di guerra*, p. 14.

caratterizzato dall'innocenza e da una atavica bonomia, per sua sfortuna — e senza colpa alcuna — coinvolto per un ventennio in disonorevoli imprese delle cui conseguenze non si avvide e rispetto alle quali non aveva possibilità di scelta.⁴³

This interpretation, which Focardi has called as the 'paradigma del mancato esame di coscienza', does not imply, though, that there were no attempts to produce memory narratives that could foreground these ideas.⁴⁴

Luca La Rovere, in his study of Italian intellectuals' journey from Fascism to post-Fascist Italy, has shown that several thinkers, in the aftermath of the war, addressed the issue of Italy's guilt and responsibility.⁴⁵ Similarly, Zunino has shown that several prominent figures of postwar Italian culture reflected on these issues.⁴⁶ However, as Focardi has stressed, although in the aftermath of World War II attempts to convey the idea of Italy's responsibility existed, they had an extremely limited scope, did not last through the decades, and did not manage to acquire a foregrounded position in the memory discourse of the past.⁴⁷

⁴³ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁴ Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*, pp. xvi-xviii.

⁴⁵ La Rovere's ideas are discussed in Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*, pp. xvii-xviii.

⁴⁶ For instance he traces such reflections in the speeches by Togliatti, in the private writings of Croce, in articles of the Antifascist journalist Mario Borsa, and in the correspondence between Gaetano Salvemini and Ernesto Rossi, in which the illustrious historian clearly writes that 'bisogna, dunque, smetterla con questa balla che l'Italia non è responsabile'. Zunino, *La Repubblica e il suo passato* pp. 429, 502, 511. It is interesting to note that the idea of the Italian responsibility for both the war and Fascism was backed up especially by people who acted within the cultural milieu of the Action Party, to which Raul Lunardi was also close. On Lunardi's proximity to the Action Party see the letter that Lunardi wrote to Vittorini on the 19th of June 1959, in *La storia dei Gettoni di Elio Vittorini*, I, p. 463. On the position of the Action Party in relation to Italy's Fascist past and on its limited effect on postwar culture see Zunino, *La Repubblica e il suo passato*, pp. 459-479; Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, p. 207.

⁴⁷ Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*, p. xviii.

In fact, despite being discussed by some intellectuals and politicians, in postwar Italy ideas of guilt and responsibility did not find the support of influential carrier groups and were not relayed by numerous, or significant, vectors of memory that could convey to the Italian public a perspective on the past based on these concepts.

Memory narratives that invite the Italians to take on responsibility for the war and for the Fascist past obtained only a peripheral position within Italy's memory discourse and were marginalised by other more prominent narratives, which exculpate the Italians by transmitting a sense of innocence and by displacing any sense of guilt. This is well reflected in the literature of the Axis War in which guilt and responsibility are foregrounded only by a small number of minor, mostly forgotten, narrative texts.

Conclusion

'La storia non è magistra
di niente che ci riguardi.
Accorgersene non serve
a farla più vera e più giusta'.¹

This study of the literary vectors of memory of the Axis War has led, with the help of the scholarship on the Italian collective memory, to the identification and description of the Italian memory discourse of World War II, which was negotiated by the diverse memory narratives that for many years polarised and divided the Italian community of memory.

The works by Focardi, Schwarz, Ben-Ghiat, and Forlenza have highlighted the dominant traits of this memory discourse. Constructed through a series of recurrent stereotypes, such as the myth of *Italiani brava gente* and the idea of German evilness, and on a sense of detachment from the Fascist past, the Italian memory of World War II was articulated around the concepts of victimhood and innocence, generating the idea that the Italians did not have to bear the guilt for Fascism since, in compliance with the paradigm of the *patriottismo espiativo*, they had been redeemed by the sacrifices they experienced in the war and by the Antifascist choice that a restricted number of citizens made.

This self-absolving memory discourse was the result of the ways in which different groups of Italians remembered World War II, negotiating

¹ E. Montale, 'La storia', *Satura*, in Montale, *Tutte le poesie*, ed. by G. Zampa (Milan: Mondadori: 1984), p. 323.

its meaning in the public sphere through a series of categories that were drawn from the Catholic cultural capital, which offered the schematic narrative templates for the construction of memory narratives of the war years.

Moreover, this discourse was closely linked to the renegotiation of the Italian identity, which, in the postwar years, was remodelled on the notion of Antifascism, on a sense of humanity nurtured by Christianity, and on the idea of the unwarlike nature of the Italian people. This reconfiguration of the conception of Italianness took place through the re-use of a series of myths, iconographies, and stereotypes that had long permeated Italian culture and it aimed to counteract and deny several of the values that had been promoted by the Fascist regime.

The literary vectors of memory of the Axis War studied in this thesis conform well to the Italian memory discourse of World War II. The analysis of the forms of repetition that characterise these texts led to the identification of a series of *topoi*, themes, and masterplots that articulate literary depictions around the ideas of innocence, victimhood, sacrifice, and redemption, closely matching the features that historians have attributed to the Italian memory discourse of World War II. These war narratives can be seen both as products of this memory discourse and, at the same time, as cultural artefacts that transmitted specific memory narratives, contributing to the negotiation of the discourse itself.

Among the recurrent meanings that the literature of the Axis War put forward, the idea of innocence appears particularly paramount, since it has been constructed at the level of both motifs and themes, as well as

by the plots of the stories. The articulation of a sense of innocence was also developed by silencing many segments of the war experience. War crimes and massacres carried out by the Italian troops during World War II have never been fully represented; the violent acts of killing that normally take place in warfare have been confined to the implicit realm, often with the aim of hiding these facts from the view of less alert readers; in some cases the entire combat experience has disappeared into textual gaps, leaving the battlefield as an unknown 'elsewhere'.

The texts of the main corpus, while taking part in the negotiation of an overall memory discourse of World War II, have equally contributed to the creation of a specific memory of the Axis War. This war has been portrayed as a useless experience of horror, death, and pain that the Italians did not want to fight, but faced with courage, doing the best they could given the inferior conditions in which they operated, and without committing the excessive brutalities that are attributed to the Fascists and, above all, to the Germans.

No author denies or hides the fact that the war was unjust and that it ended in utter disaster, as a conflict that the national army and the Fascist dictatorship proved unable to fight. Instead, many texts present the Axis War as the proof of the wrongness of Fascism, as the main event that led to an ineluctable fracture between the Italians and the dictatorship.

As a result, the Italian literature of the Axis War conveyed to its readers certain important ideas — such as the significance of the Antifascist choice, the condemnation of warfare as a useless experience,

and the immorality of Fascism — which helped the construction of a renewed democratic community. Moreover, in partial contrast to the dominant narratives within the Italian memory discourse, these vectors of memory also foregrounded the Italian defeat in World War II, contributing to the diffusion of this idea across society.

However, although these writers did not conceal the defeat of the Italian army, they tended to hide behind it. Having suffered greatly in the war and faced the abomination that modern warfare implies, these authors conveyed an absolving picture of the Italian participation in World War II, presenting the Axis War as a calamity, akin to a natural disaster, whose responsibility could be ascribed at most to the Fascist regime, but did not involve the core of the Italian nation. As a result, the literature of the Axis War did not foreground ideas of guilt and responsibility and, in this way, did not help Italian readers to reflect on the wrongdoings committed by the members of their national community.

The three texts analysed in the Epilogue of this thesis show that the Axis War could have been narrated, even through the categories fostered by postwar Italian culture, in ways that would have foregrounded a sense of guilt and responsibility. If more writers had developed a similar perspective, the literature of the Axis War could have contributed to the acknowledgement of past crimes, fostering the necessity to take responsibility for what the Italians did during the war as members of a Fascist nation.

Yet the lack of a sense of responsibility for the past, rather than being simply a trait of the literature of the Axis War, was a general feature

of the whole of postwar Italian culture, informing the way in which the memory discourse of World War II was shaped. The Axis War has been ignored by the vast majority of the Italian carrier groups and memory activists and achieved only a marginal position within the national memory discourse. Therefore, the failure to foster the idea of responsibility can only be partially ascribed to the authors of the main corpus, and should instead be seen as a shortcoming of the Italian cultural system.

In order to show this process of collective self-censorship, future research should investigate the critical reception that the literature of the Axis War obtained in the postwar years. This promises to be an extremely fruitful research endeavour, as a thorough assessment of the few reviews published in newspapers and literary journals will reveal the role that the national cultural system had in avoiding any reflections on the question of Italian responsibility.²

As a result of the marginalisation of the Axis War in the Italian memory discourse and in the cultural system, only the veterans remained interested in the preservation of its memory and in the narration of stories about it. These men, however, having lived through the atrocities that informed the war experience, were too much involved in the events they related, during which they suffered greatly and in which many of

² An example of this is the review that Carlo Bo wrote about Lunardi's *Diario di un soldato semplice*, which completely failed to acknowledge the text's ethical dimension related to the investigation of the protagonist's sense of guilt, see Bo, 'Diario di un soldato semplice', *La fiera letteraria*, 10th of August (1952), p. 5. An enquiry into the critical reception of the literature of the Axis War is likely to reveal many of the limits that affected the reception of Flaiano's criticism of Italian colonialism in *Tempo di uccidere*: see L. Re, 'Italy's First Postcolonial Novel and the End of (Neo)Realism', *The Italianist*, 37.3 (2017), 416-435 (p. 419).

their companions lost their lives. Their episodic memories were marked by hardship, torments, and traumas, leading them to narrate the Italian participation in World War II from the perspective of the victim, rather than from that of the perpetrator.

The narrativisation of the Axis War would have instead benefitted from a plurality of different perspectives, which could have fostered the formation of more detached and therefore critical accounts, contributing, in a dialogue with the memories of the veterans, to the formation of a more nuanced memory discourse on the Axis War.

This conviction is backed up by the fact that, across the narratives that have been surveyed for this thesis, only one offers examples of war crimes committed by the Italians: Moravia's *La ciociara*. In this text the narrator reports several brutal acts of violence committed by the Italian soldiers before World War II, during the colonial war in Libya and the seizure of Albania. For instance a veteran of the 1911-1912 Libyan war remembers that:

Avevano ammazzato tre dei nostri... ma ammazzato è dir poco... gli avevano cavato gli occhi, tagliata la lingua, strappate le unghie... allora decidemmo di fare la rappresaglia... di mattina presto andammo in uno dei villaggi e bruciammo tutte le capanne e ammazzammo tutti, uomini, donne, e bambini... alle bambine, figlie di mignotte, gli infilammo la baionetta nella fregna e le buttammo sul mucchio... così gli levammo la voglia di fare altre atrocità.³

In this passage Moravia does not shy away from representing the most shocking, obscene, and gory practices that take place in a war. This

³ Moravia, *La ciociara*, p. 49. Another Italian war crime is narrated at p. 107.

example shows how the words of a major writer, who was not directly involved in the story he narrates, can be more illuminating than the innumerable pages written by people who, after the direct experience of an event, relate it through the legitimization provided by the use of their episodic memories. Representations of this kind, which clearly highlight the role of the Italians as perpetrators of wrongdoings, could have transmitted to the Italian public a simple conception: the fact that the Italians were not better, or worse, than other populations when it comes to war brutalities.⁴

The memory discourse constructed in the first decades after the end of World War II has lasted unchallenged for many years, constituting a shaping force that affected the ways the Italians remembered this part of their national history. Moreover, this memory discourse continued to affect the cultural depiction of the Axis War, as is proven by the fact that vectors of memory produced decades after 1974 persisted in re-proposing the stereotypes discussed in this thesis.⁵

Future studies will tell whether the representations developed after the period of time considered here problematised the depiction of

⁴ The importance that this idea might have had for Italy's memory culture is also stressed in Pavone, 'Introduction', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 9.3 (2004) 271-279 (p. 277). See also Ben-Ghiat, 'Unmaking the Fascist Man', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, p. 347.

⁵ A well-known example of this is the Academy-award-winning film *Mediterraneo*, by Gabriele Salvatores', inspired by Biasion's short stories, which heavily re-proposes the topos of *Italiani brava gente* and of the Army of love. The international success of the movie, together with other international cultural products, such as the 1993 novel *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* by Louis Bernières — transposed into a film by John Madden in 2001 — attested to the diffusion of this stereotype beyond the perimeter of Italian culture. On Salvatores' film see Giovacchini, 'Soccer with the Dead', in *Repicturing the Second World War*, pp. 55-69.

the Italian participation in the Axis War.⁶ In particular it will be useful to verify whether after the 1990s any writer benefitted from the significant advancement of the historiographical scholarship on the Axis War and, therefore, developed more nuanced and less stereotyped representations of this event.

Yet, even in relation to the memory constructed during the period 1944–1974, the work cannot be considered complete. First of all it would be necessary to explore the corpus related to the African campaigns of the Axis War and assess how these texts relate to and differ from those investigated by this study. More attention should also be given to the role of publishing companies in promoting certain representations of the Axis War. This would allow to stress the differences between the works published by conservative publishers, such as Mursia and Longanesi, and those published by Einaudi, Feltrinelli, Mondadori, and Bompiani, notwithstanding the numerous common points on which this thesis has focused.

Moreover, in order to fully highlight the role that Italian literature played in transmitting memories of World War II, it would be necessary to study other segments of postwar literature as a medium for cultural memory. In particular, addressing the literature of the Resistance as vectors that took part in the negotiation of the Italian memory discourse of World War II would help to highlight how some of the topoi and themes of the literature of the Axis War were also conveyed by these literary

⁶ For instance few years after the span of time considered by this study two of the longest Italian novels on World War II were published: S. D'Arrigo, *Horcynus Orca* (Milan: Mondadori, 1975); Corni, *Il cavallo rosso* (Milan: Ares, 1983).

products. Hence, a more direct comparison between the texts explored by this thesis and the literature of the Italian Resistance will assess the full scope of the circulation of typified depictions in postwar Italian culture. This will also help to underscore the ways in which several canonical works actually challenged and problematised many of these recurrent representations.

Furthermore, the study of the mediation and transmission of the Italian memory of World War II through cultural products would benefit from an intermedial perspective, which could also bring into account the representations put forward by other media such as poetry, films, monuments, visual arts, popular magazines, and television programmes in order to make a more thorough assessment of the memory narratives that were conveyed by various cultural products.

Finally, since the memory of World War II has also been closely entangled with changes in the general conceptualisation of warfare upheld by society at large, an exhaustive assessment of the cultural production in its relationship with the memory of World War II will also have to consider how other wars, such as the Great War and those of the Risorgimento, have been mediated in the Italian culture of the second half of the twentieth century.⁷ In other words, it would be necessary to address the more general issue of war representation in the light of the memory discourse of World War II that was negotiated in Italy in the postwar years.

⁷ Isnenghi touches upon this point by putting post-1945 films on the Italian Risorgimento in relation with the memory of World War II, see Isnenghi, *Le guerre degli italiani*, p. 164.

The study of the literary representation of the Axis War would also be enriched by comparative studies. By exploring how World War II has been mediated in the literature of other countries of the Axis Powers, such as Germany, Austria, Japan, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary, it would be possible to assess more broadly how the nations defeated in World War II narrativised their past. A similar comparative survey would identify which of the stereotypes that have characterised the Italian memory discourse have also affected the memory negotiated in other national contexts and which have constituted a peculiarity of Italian culture.

Moreover, in order to determine if some of the typified depictions that characterise the literature of the Axis War have been part of a longer discourse on warfare within Italian culture, it appears necessary to compare the literature of the Axis War with the war literature produced in other periods of Italian history. In particular, it would be extremely useful to explore how other wars fought by the Fascist regime, such as those in Libya, Ethiopia, and Spain, were represented in literary works published under the dictatorship. This study, which would be invaluable to understand the conceptualisation of war developed by Fascism, would help to outline more precisely the differences and the continuities in the Italian war literature written before and after World War II.

Such comparative perspectives would improve the understanding of the history of Italian war literature. Moreover, they would not only position the literature of the Axis War vis-à-vis the broader literature of World War II, but would also help to situate the former within the history of the literature of Italian colonialism.

Appendix 1: The Anthologies of the Italian Resistance

- Sturani Monti, Luisa, ed., *Antologia della Resistenza*, intro. by Augusto Monti (Turin: Centro del Libro Popolare, 1951)
- Marchetti, Aristide, Guido Tassinari, eds., *La Resistenza nella letteratura: antologia*, intro. by Giovanni Gronchi (Milan: Associazione Partigiani A. Di Dio, 1955)
- Accrocca, Filippo, Valerio Volpini, eds., *Antologia poetica della Resistenza italiana* (S. Giovanni Valdarno: Landi, 1955)
- Milan, Maurizio, Fausto Vighi, eds., *La resistenza al Fascismo: scritti e testimonianze*, intro. by Giovanni Pirelli (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1955)
- Romano Tito, Giorgio Solza, eds., *Canti della Resistenza italiana* (Milan: Avanti!, 1960)
- Canti del primo e del secondo Risorgimento*, ed. by consiglio federativo giovanile della Resistenza (Venice: Tip. Commerciale, 1961)
- Pasqualini, Luciano, Mario Saccenti, eds., *Due Risorgimenti: pagine di storia italiana: 1796-1947* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1961)
- Battaglia, Roberto, Raffaello Ramat, eds., *Un popolo in lotta: testimonianze di vita italiana dall'Unità al 1946* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1961)
- Repaci, Antonino, Carlenrico Navone, eds., *Dio e popolo: antologia del Risorgimento e della Resistenza* (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1961)
- Carocci, Giampiero, ed., *La Resistenza italiana* (Milan: Garzanti, 1963)
- Laurano, Renzo, Gaetano Salveti, eds., *Le cinque guerre: poesie e canti italiani* (Milan: Nuova Accademia, 1965)
- Bertero, Ornella, Pietro Rachetto, eds., *Antologia poetica della resistenza* (Turin : Voci Nuove, 1965)
- Pignato Li Pera, Rosathea, ed., *La Resistenza nella narrativa Italiana: antologia di letteratura contemporanea per le scuole medie superiori* (Brescia: Vannini, 1969)
- Tarizzo, Domenico, ed., *Come scriveva la resistenza* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1969)
- Bermani, Cesare, ed., *Canti della Resistenza armata in Italia* (Milan: Edizioni del Gallo, 1972)
- Abruzzese, Alberto, ed., *L'età dell'antifascismo e della Resistenza* (Florence: La Nuova Italia 1974)

- Bonea, Ennio, Armida Marasco, eds., *Resistenza e letteratura* (Lecce: Editrice Adriatica, 1974)
- Bermani, Cesare, ed., *Canti della Resistenza armata in Italia*, new edn (Milan: Edizioni Bella Ciao, 1974)
- Luti, Giorgio, Sergio Romagnoli, eds., *L'Italia partigiana* (Milan: Longanesi, 1975)
- Marchetti, Aristide, Guido Tassinari, eds., *La Resistenza nella letteratura: antologia*, intro. by Giovanni Gronchi, repr. edn (Rome: EBE, 1975)
- Maestri, Delmo, ed., *Resistenza e impegno letterario* (Turin: Paravia, 1975)
- Bermani, Cesare, ed., *Canti della Resistenza armata in Italia* (Milan: Edizioni Bella Ciao, 1975)
- Bonea, Ennio, ed., *La letteratura partigiana: stampa clandestina e canti* (Lecce: Adriatica Editrice Salentina, 1975)
- Benvenuti Riva, Giovanna, ed., *Letteratura e Resistenza* (Milan: Principato Editore, 1977)
- Dentone, Adriana, Paola Tonelli, eds., *Scrittori e Resistenza: antologia* (Genoa: Libreria Mondini-Siccardi, 1978)
- Rossi, Amato, ed., *La resistenza italiana: scritti, documenti e testimonianze* (Rome: Lucarini, 1981)
- Falaschi, Giovanni, ed., *La letteratura partigiana in Italia 1943-1945*, intro. by Natalia Ginzburg (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1984)
- Pedrotti Probo, Marilena, ed., *Resistenza e poesia: antologia di poeti partigiani* (Rome: Il Ventaglio, 1984)
- Savona, Virgilio, Michele Straniero, eds., *Canti della Resistenza italiana* (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1985)
- Gentile, Ettore, ed., *La letteratura della Resistenza: testimonianze e testi di narrativa e di poesia* (Naples: Federico e Ardia, 1987)
- Vacana, Gerardo, Giacinto Minnocci, eds., *Antologia poetica della Resistenza italiana* (Frosinone: Amministrazione Provinciale, 1995)
- Cicala, Roberto, ed., *'Con la violenza la pietà': poesia e Resistenza: antologia di testi*, intro. by Franco Fortini (Novara: Interlinea, 1995)
- Omodeo Zorini, Francesco, ed., *Una scrittura morale: antologia di giornali della Resistenza* (Borgosesia; Venice: Istituto Cino Moscatelli per la storia della Resistenza e della società contemporanea nelle province di Biella e Vercelli, 1996)
- Cooke, Philip, ed., *The Italian Resistance: An Anthology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997)

- Bermani, Cesare, ed., *Canti della resistenza armata in Italia*, repr. edn (Rome, Sapere, 2000)
- Mariuz, Giuseppe, ed., *Poesie e canti della Resistenza* (San Vito al Tagliamento: Ellerani, 2005)
- Pedullà Gabriele, ed., *Racconti della Resistenza* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005)
- Bonzanini, Marta, ed., *Con le armi e con la penna: poesia clandestina della Resistenza* (Novara : Interlinea, 2009)
- Luti, Giorgio, ed., *Bella ciao: Resistenza e letteratura* (Arezzo: Helicon, 2009)

Appendix 2: Postwar Italian Films of the Axis War

- Come persi la guerra*, dir. by Carlo Borghesio (Lux Film: 1947)
- Anni difficili*, dir. by Luigi Zampa (Fincine: 1948)
- I peggiori anni della nostra vita*, dir. by Mario Amendola (Herald Pictures: 1949)
- Carica Eroica*, dir. by Francesco De Robertis (Lux Films: 1952)
- Penne Nere*, dir. by Oreste Biancoli (Mander Film: 1952)
- I sette dell'orsa maggiore*, dir. by Duilio Coletti (Cei Incom: 1953)
- La pattuglia dell'Amba Alagi*, dir. by Flavio Calzavara (Felix Film: 1953)
- Mizar: sabotaggio in mare*, dir. by Francesco De Robertis (Film Costellazione: 1953)
- La grande speranza*, dir. by Duilio Coletti (Minerva Film: 1954)
- Siluri umani*, dir. by Antonio Leonviola (Paramount: 1954)
- Uomini ombra*, dir. by Francesco De Robertis (Cei Incom: 1954)
- Divisione Folgore*, dir. by Duilio Coletti (Cei: 1954)
- Ciao Pais!*, dir. by Osvaldo Langini (Astory Film: 1956)
- Il prezzo della gloria*, dir. by Antonio Musu (Enic: 1956)
- La donna che venne dal mare*, dir. by Francesco De Robertis (Cei Incom: 1957)
- El Alamein: deserto di gloria*, dir. by Guido Malatesta (Siden Film: 1957)
- Il cielo brucia*, dir. by Giuseppe Masini (Filmar: 1957)
- Pezzo capopezzo e capitano*, dir. by Wolfgang Staudte (Atlantis Film: 1958)
- Lupi nell'abisso*, dir. by Silvio Amadio (Major Film: 1959)
- Tutti a casa*, dir. by Luigi Comencini (Dino De Laurentiis: 1960)
- Quattro notti con Alba*, dir. by (Globe International Film: 1961)
- L'affondamento della Valiant*, dir. by Roy Ward Baker (Euro Intern Film: 1961)
- I due nemici*, dir. by Guy Hamilton (De Laurentiis: 1961)
- I due colonnelli*, dir. by Steno (Titanus: 1962)
- Pastasciutta nel deserto*, dir. by Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia (Cineriz: 1962)

Finchè dura la tempesta, dir. by Bruno Vailati (Warner Bros: 1963)

Vino whisky e acqua salata, dir. by Mario Amendola (M.M. Cinematografica:1963)

Una sporca guerra, dir. by Dino Tavella (Gondola Film: 1964)

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